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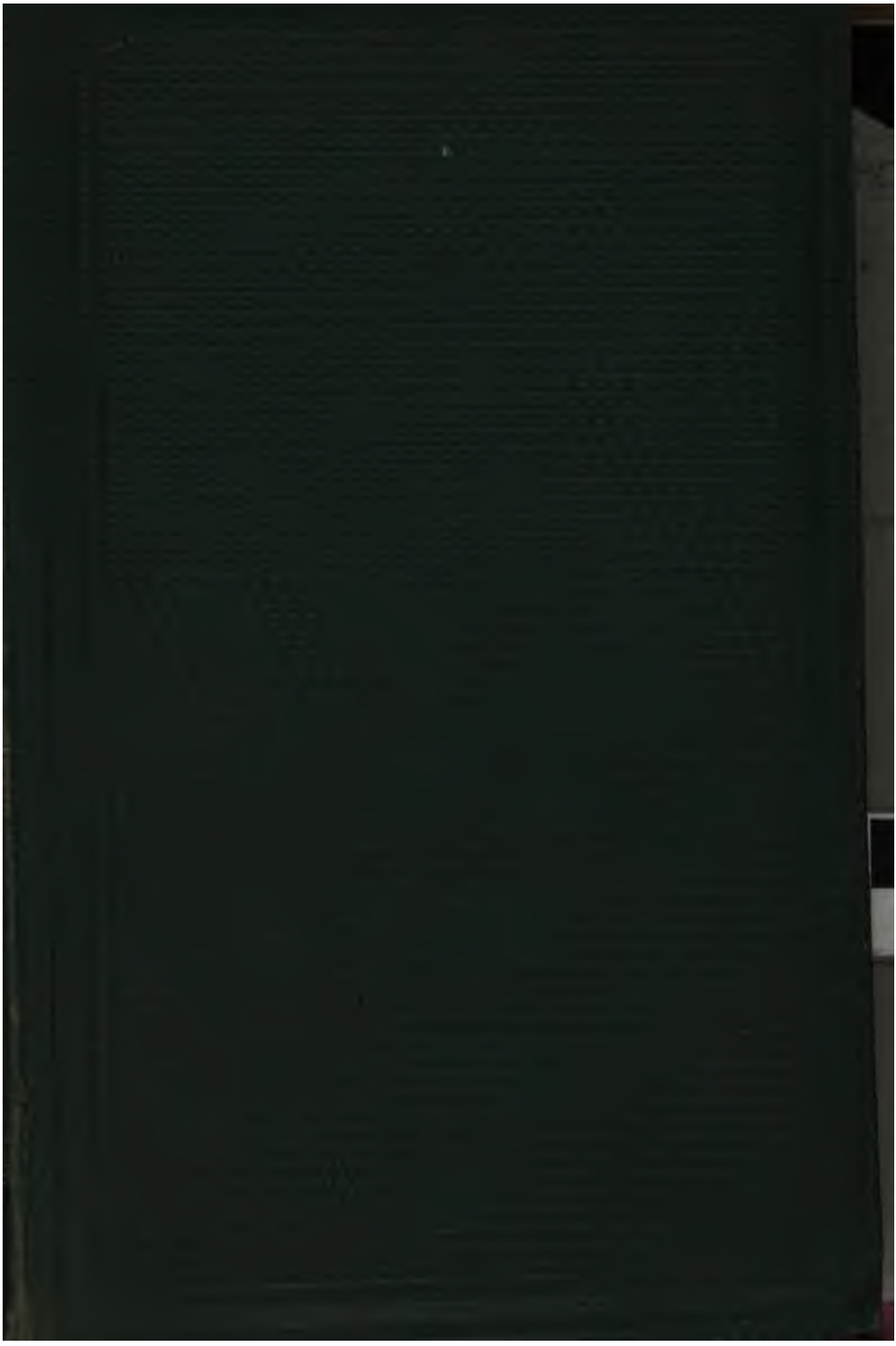

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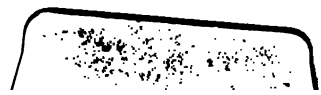

MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

VOL. II.

MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "UNDER THE SPELL,"

"WILDFLOWER," "A WOMAN'S RANSOM,"

&c., &c.

"What is he, for Heaven's sake? Can no man give him his true character?"

HEYWOOD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BOOK III.

BEGINNING TROUBLE.

CHAPTER I.

ONE YEAR.

FOR one year after my engagement—for one long year—I was a happy woman! Happy with the world, content with myself, looking forward to a brighter, even a happier future—proud of my own strong heart, and trustful of strength in others.

I kept my secret close, more for his sake—Mark's sake!—than for my own. He had been fearful of rendering my position uncomfortable by the avowal, and I knew that it pleased him to think that all at the Hall remained unconscious of the troth plighted in the heavy rain, on a Sunday ever memorable to me. And it was pleasant to possess this secret; to feel that I could at any moment steal apart to my own world and submerge myself

—that the little vexations which met me in every-day life were all the more readily surmounted by this process.

No one seemed to suspect me at the Hall—on that Sunday night wherein my life changed, I had gone at once to my room, for good. On the Monday morning Isabel met me with reproaches at my "ill tempers," as she termed them, which had led me to lock myself in my room all the evening. "Who had offended me?" she had asked more than once, judging my motives by her own peculiar method of resenting actions she disliked in others.

Mrs. Kingsworth had herself gone early to her room, and Mr. Mannington had not evinced any curiosity concerning my absence, which, considering how curious a man he was, I took for a good sign. The first day over, I was safe; and further and further back stole that Sunday night which had perplexed me to look forward to, and which thrilled my heart so strangely to look back at.

I received letters from Mr. Stewart now and then; not too frequently, for our secret's sake. The Edinburgh post-mark might have suggested a

suspicion to an inquiring mind; but, in the first place, my brother was at Edinburgh, and, in the second, I was an earlier riser than Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Mannington, and had read and re-read my letter long before their appearance at the breakfast table.

In that year Miss Castle was considered to have completed the education of Isabel Mannington, and took her departure, much to her late pupil's satisfaction.

"If there be a chance of happiness from this time, I shall find it now," Bel said to me. "How I hated her, to be sure!"

"Haven't you got rid of that disagreeable assertion of hating everybody, Isabel?"

"I am of strong likes and dislikes," she answered pertly. "I love and I hate—and I don't love you for one!"

And away flounced Miss Mannington—a young lady past sixteen then, her own mistress, and free from reports to her *governante*.

What had a year done for her and me?—in twelmonths' close association together, people understand each other's character, and learn to

value, despise, or respect. Well, I had learned to value her—even to entertain a kind of pity for her, which, it need scarcely be said, I carefully disguised. I valued her for her true nature—earnest and deep loving; and I pitied her for that impetuousness, I might call it wilfulness, which resisted control, and fought against her better thoughts—which stood ever the sad result of that ill training she had had before Mrs. Kingsworth or I had known her. That failing, almost approximate to a mental defect, was painfully apparent still—well for her, I often thought that hers was a quiet home, and that in dear Wilthorpe—I had learned to love the place with all my heart—there were not likely to approach trials and troubles to distress her much. Fortunate for her, in more senses than one, that she was an heiress—that her future, so far as wealth could brighten it, would be made easy for her. There would be no hard fighting with the world.

Mrs. Kingsworth, whom I had learned to love also, as I had learned to understand her better, seemed anxious, on more than one occasion, for my opinion of her niece. Was Bel improving?—

was she all that could be wished?—did I think that she would become a good and amiable woman?

I thought that Isabel would become so in good time; that with little to disturb her, there were no chances against the possibility.

"Her mother was an excitable woman, or a lazy, selfish one; and her father is a fidgety and narrow-minded man—the chances *are* against her, Miss Casey."

Mrs. Kingsworth made but few inquiries about my brother. On the day his cheque was due, she had asked me if his address were still the same, and whether I had heard of him lately?

"He is doing well, I hear," was my answer; "I have had one letter from him."

"He can't like Mr. Stewart," she said quickly.

"He does not mention his name."

"Humph!—that's a bad sign. Send him the cheque, and if he can make better use of it than of the others, it will be news worth communicating to me."

But that news never came; and being a bad correspondent, the acknowledgment of the cheque

arrived about six months afterwards. The cheque itself did not even speedily find its way back to Mrs. Kingsworth's bankers—it was cashed in Edinburgh, three months after date.

"Your brother writes a fine hand," Mrs. Kingsworth said, looking at the back of that cheque which had been made out "to the order" of John Kingsworth Casey; "there's a dash about his capitals which a graphiologist would set down for vigour and perseverance. What a mistake!"

Mrs. Kingsworth took interest in another matter, to which I will now allude in this chapter of "summaries"—this was an interest founded on an error, and tended to embarrass me not a little.

Mr. Richard Stewart was the cause of this. In the year that had passed, I had also learned to understand him better, as I thought—to see the good in him which an austere and abrupt demeanour concealed, and concerning which his brother Mark had spoken to me.

He had no secrets from Dick, Mr. Stewart had told me, not even the secret of our engagement, and this knowledge rendered me a little embarrassed, when I met the land-bailiff for the first time after

my Sunday. It was at the Hall, I remember; he had come to transact business with Mrs. Kingsworth, after the old fashion, and I had been sent to tell him that Mrs. Kingsworth was not quite ready to receive him.

He extended his hand to me immediately I entered the room, and wrung mine so warmly in his, that I drew in my breath a little.

"I beg your pardon," he said, stammering and blushing like a girl; "I—I've hurt you, Miss Casey—that's like my clumsiness. Where's Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"She will be down presently."

"Not out of bed, I suppose?" he said, in a disparaging tone; "well, all the better for this once, though I am pressed for time. Do you mind sitting down, and keeping me company till she arrives?"

"No, sir."

So I sat down and faced him, conscious that I was reddening somewhat beneath his searching gaze.

I remember too that he leaned forward, touched my arm, and said under his breath, "*Mark's wife*," and that this assertion, of which he was almost

unconscious, deepened the "colouring" considerably.

"Mark and you have made a match of it, then," he said in a low tone; "you don't know, Miss Casey, how glad I am to think that he will settle in life—how it has bothered me—he with a great business, a great house all to himself, and a great heart too—ah!" bursting into his usual sharp snapping sonorousness, "that's the best of it. He told me all about it when he came back that Sunday night."

"Did he?" I could only answer at the moment.

"Of course he did," replied my companion; "he and I together have nothing to conceal. If I were in trouble of any kind, I should go to Mark as I would have gone to my own father in his time; and I think—hang it, I know!—that Mark would come to me before all his world of grand acquaintances. He told me, to be sure—and—shall I tell you what I told him?"

He almost shouted this last interrogative, with his eyes further out of his head than ever with excitement.

"If you will excuse my curiosity," I answered,

becoming more at my ease in his presence. After all, he was Mark's brother, and I must try my best to like him, for my Mark's sake.

"I told him that he could not have made a better choice," said he; "that he didn't want, and wasn't fit for, a fine lady-wife, with her niminy-piminy nonsense about all manner of things. What are you laughing at?"

"Why, may I not become a fine lady-wife, when my head is turned by that greatness to which he will raise me?" I asked.

"Your head turned!—get out!" he answered. "Why, I knew what a good wife you would make, as soon as he did. That's the girl for Mark, I said, when I had had a good look at you on the sly—she'll do, at any rate, and she's the first I have ever come across. For you must understand, Miss Casey, that I have been looking out for a wife for Mark these three years. If I had seen one to my mind at Wilthorpe, I think that I should have telegraphed to Edinburgh, and said, 'Mark, come at once—I've found her!' And I'm sure that he would have understood me, for it has been a standing joke between us."

"He must thank you for your interest, by finding a wife for you in Edinburgh."

"Ah! a Scotch girl, all cheek-bone—what a joke!" said he, laughing. "No, that wouldn't suit me. I haven't seen the girl that will suit me —I never shall!"

"How is that?"

"Perhaps I should have said that I have not seen the girl whom I could suit. I'm ill-tempered, sulky, bearish. I've lived too long alone in my cottage, and grown too used to my own ways to care to have either my home or my old habits disturbed. I know that it hasn't improved me—I often think what disagreeable, miserable old humbugs those hermits must have been!"

"When I am your sister," I ventured to say, "I shall look out for you instead of Mark. You own that you are not happy in that cottage?"

"Happy in my way, which is not everybody's way," said he, in reply; "and fast settling down to my own theory of what is good and proper for me. A man can get used to anything, you know."

"But why——"

"Don't draw me into argument, Miss Casey—

when once I begin argument, I'm lost. I go on for hours like a steam engine. In my hermitage —Mark christened my home by that name, the rascal—I argue with myself on the drollest topics —and get up a quarrel with myself occasionally. Mrs. Kingsworth is late—I thought that she wouldn't be quite ready, but I did not build upon so long a conversation with you. She knows nothing of this?"

I understood his allusion, and responded in the negative.

"If it had not been for making you uncomfortable here, it would have been better to tell her," he said, thoughtfully; "but she don't like Mark, and perhaps it *is* as well. He thought so, and he's a man who always knows what is best. I shall enjoy her surprise very much, when the time comes."

"Can you surprise her?" I asked.

"Yes—I think it possible," he answered, "if old Mannington don't ferret the matter out for himself. By the way, while I think of it, take care of him. Trust him just as far as you can see him—not quite so far will be the better plan—and

when he is more than usually kind and fatherly, then look out more sharply."

"You do not like Mr. Mannington?"

"Not much," was the dry answer; "but you're safe enough, and if he even drop on the truth, what harm can he do *us!* You and I can fight our battle together, if need require the alliance —and it may be necessary, for Mark's sake. You and I, too, must be good friends; it will make our future relationship more pleasant. I'm not going to keep up this Miss Caseying, for one thing. You'll not mind?"

"Why should I?"

"Exactly—why should you? I haven't quite made up *my* mind what I shall call you, though. Bertha's such an ugly name!"

"Do you think so?"

"I know so! What does your brother call you?"

"Bertie."

"Ah! that's better. But that won't do yet awhile—you might just as well call me 'Dicky' as that. I'll think about it, and give you my opinion!"

"Thank you," was my wicked reply; at which he laughed, and brought his hand down on his knee, in a manner I had already seen before. And whilst laughing thus, Mrs. Kingsworth entered, erect and vigilant as ever. She looked at Mr. Richard Stewart and said:

"Any extraordinary good news, Mr. Stewart?"

"No, madam."

"You're in so good a temper that I thought you must have heard of your brother doubling his capital, at all events."

"No, that news hasn't been communicated to me yet."

"You must wait patiently and have faith," said she with some acerbity; "with time before so fortunate a capitalist, your——"

"Shall we proceed to business?" asked her bailiff uncourteously.

"—Your brother's chance is a good one," she concluded; "now, let us look over the matter of that purchase, and pray don't diverge if you can help it."

"I never diverged from a business subject in my life!" cried Richard Stewart, whose feelings

Mrs. Kingsworth had evidently contrived to wound.

"I would not believe you upon your oath, sir," affirmed Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Upon my oath I wouldn't ask you."

After this smart interchange of remarks, mistress and man drew their chairs to the table more amicably.

When business was over, and Mr. Richard Stewart had departed, Mrs. Kingsworth turned upon me suddenly.

"What do you think of that man?"

"That he is a man to like very much when once understood."

"Honest and genuine—yes."

It was all she said at that time, but she was observant after that, and the interest to which I have alluded gathered strength, despite her wish to appear devoid of interest in anything.

Richard Stewart and I met once or twice a week by accident; and when he had received a letter from his brother, he found an opportunity to seek me out and read it to me line by line, laying stress on any part wherein my name was mentioned.

Richard Stewart and I during that year became great friends—his love for Mark would have made us friends had he been less kind and considerate to me. I had almost feared, in the first moments of my engagement, what he would say; and it had opened my heart towards him to find that he had wished the match, and flattered me to think that he was not only proud of me for his brother's sake. He always called me Miss Bertie after our first explanation—Miss, out of respect for his brother, he said; Bertie, for a fancy of his own that he had taken to that name. He was a true and good friend, and I felt sure that when the time came I should be a good sister to him. After all, his was an eccentric friendship, despite its depth and truth; plain-spoken and earnest as he was, there reigned always throughout his manner towards me a courtly reserve or respect, as though I were in a position somewhat above his own. I was to be his brother's wife, and he was very proud of that brother—I knew the motive well enough, and I liked him none the less for it.

Once only during that year I saw Mark. It was a flying visit, made during a journey to London,

from which he had deviated to see *me*. For only a few minutes talk with me, he broke his journey at Peterborough and came on to Wilthorpe.

That meeting rendered me content for months after the year had passed; he was a business man, with whom time was money, and, until I took his name and shared his home, I must rest content with his letters and a glimpse of him now and then. He was in good spirits; looking well and bright—he had been summoned to London on a mission that he hoped would bring him in ten thousand pounds.

"After this year, Bertie," he said almost exultingly, "I shall take things more easily. After this year, I shall ask you which particular day you think looks nicest in the almanack."

Happy and brief interview, in which I went with him a little way upon his homeward route, and in which our hearts were open. He would not talk of my brother, Mrs. Kingsworth, or of anything but ourselves that day; he put me off with a few monosyllables, and spoke of the future waiting for us. We walked into the country, where Richard Stewart, who was to drive his brother to Peter-

borough, waited with a horse and chaise about a mile from the Hall. We walked very slowly onwards, and if I could have loved him better, why, I did that day, I'm sure!

"Take it easy, young man, and—lose the train," said his brother Richard as we came up.

"Why?—do you begrudge me these fugitive moments, you villain?"

"I'm a business man," was the evasive answer, "and I'm a feeling man, who is not going to cut the horse in half to gratify your future anxiety to make up for lost time."

"Patience, Dick. We shall have plenty of time, and I shall have plenty of *your* company."

Dick tried to reach his brother's legs with the whip, but failed in his intention.

"Dick must have a great deal to tell me though, Bertie," he said; "he is my brother, and has a right to look after my interests. I hope you have kept your eyes on the curate especially, Richard!"

"I generally shut them when he preaches, Mark."

"As irreverent as I am, you see, Bertie," he said,

shrugging his shoulders, "and so dull of comprehension!"

"Time!" called Richard Stewart.

"Ah! it waits for no man—God bless you, Bertie!"

He kissed me suddenly, or I might not have taken it so naturally, and pressed something in my hand.

"What is this, Mark?"

"Ring *number one*," he said, significantly. "Good-bye."

He sprang into the chaise, and was driven away. I watched him out of sight of the country road, and he waved his handkerchief towards me from the chaise, until we faded one from the other. That is another picture I see still at times, and the tears are in my eyes, gazing at it too intently.

I did not look at ring number one until I was at home; then I felt sorry that it was a costly hoop of diamonds—a something which I could not always wear for his sake, without attracting attention and surprise. A something that did not befit my present position, and so had to be locked away—another secret! I remembered then that I intended

to have asked him to allow me to confide in Mrs. Kingsworth, and I was sorry that his talk of our future had drove the subject out of my head. In my next letter I mentioned my wish, and he expressed an opinion in return that it was impolitic, but he left me free to act. What pleased me always pleased him, he wrote. But he had expressed a wish also, and it was my love that made it law. I submerged my better judgment, and kept silent. This story would not have been written had I spoken out, perhaps—or if written, with how different a purpose!

The year—that first happy year which I have chronicled—was passed, when Mrs. Kingsworth suddenly startled me with news. How long that lady brooded on a subject, or what time she took to make up her mind, it is impossible to say—the result came on one with a precipitancy that gave it the appearance of an idea suddenly conceived, and this I know was wrong.

"Miss Casey," she said, "I am going to Edinburgh."

"Alone, madam?"

"No, with Isabel. The child is not well, and I

am beginning to fancy that this place may be too dull for her. She is young, and must see society a little. It is natural enough."

"Do you think Edinburgh, in particular, the place best suited for her?"

"It is as good as any place; I have friends there, and I have a curiosity that leads me thither, and makes it worth the visiting."

"John!"

"No—Mr. Stewart. I am very anxious to see exactly what kind of position he holds in the modern Athens—what the world says of him there."

Every minute I anticipated her asking me to accompany her—me, who held the position of guardian to Bel Mannington. But she remained silent on the subject, and my heart, which had throbbed wildly with hope, became cold and chill at her reserve.

"Shall you make a long stay there, Mrs. Kingsworth?" I asked, after a time.

"I am not certain—I think not," she responded; "meanwhile, you——"

My heart throbbed again, but only for an instant.

"You must take my place here, keep down the

unruly staff of servants, and be mistress of the Hall. I can trust you, and—you only!"

"Mr. Mannington accompanies you?"

"Oh! he goes with us, of course—he and the luggage!" was the severe addition here.

"And Emma?"

"Will stay behind—I cannot be troubled by too many anomalies."

I felt glad that I was not to be left entirely alone, although Emma and I were not the friends of old time. She had never forgiven me my past reserve—she had become Isabel's confidante rather than mine; in all things she sided with Mrs. Kingsworth's niece, and I was often grieved to think how soon she had grown tired of me. I had fancied once that she would always love me for John Casey's sake.

Later that night, Mrs. Kingsworth came to my room. An old habit of hers, it seemed now; when there was anything particular to ask or to relate, she came rustling along the corridor, after the house was still.

She knocked at my door and came in.

"Miss Casey," she said, taking her place by the

mantelpiece, and retaining her hold of her stick, which she swung loosely between her fingers, "I am not going to keep you up to-night by an irrrelevant discourse. I have only come to ask a question, and I am not anxious about the answer. You can reply, or refuse a reply, which you please."

I thought of Mr. Stewart—had she guessed the truth at last?

"I will do my best to answer," I said.

And I had intended to tell her all the truth then, if she wished it.

"What do you think of Mr. Stewart now?"

"Mr. Stewart—of Edinburgh?"

"That man!—why should I care for your opinion of that purse-proud fellow? No—his brother."

"I esteem him very much."

"It is a plain question—but I am an old woman, with but little breath to spare," she said; "are you likely to marry him?"

"Marry Mr. Richard Stewart?—oh, madam, no!"

"Are you quite certain?"

"Quite."

"If he asked you to be his wife, you would accept him?"

"No, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"I am mistaken, then. More," she added, "I am sorry. When I am gathered,"—it was a strange phrase and thrilled me—"of course you would not leave me before—he would have made you a good husband, and I am sure that you would have been happy with him. I can see what a good match it might have been—no matter!"

She bade me good night, and went out of the room, waiting for no further conversation. There was a long journey before her the next day, and she had no time to waste on me.

The next day, in the bright morning, Bel Mannington sought me, flushed and excited. A year had not altered her in any way—she was still slight and girlish in figure—and it was a girl's face still, rather than a woman's. The dark eyes were aflame with delight.

"Off at last, Bertha!" she said; "the life of a city, instead of the vegetation of such a place as this! Off to learn manners, my aunt considers—I don't mind what I learn, so that the world moves a little faster round with me. It cannot go round too rapidly—I shall never be giddy—*viva!*"

She spun round my room, humming a waltz tune. I could but notice the grace and rapidity of her movements, and wondered whether she would ever be staid and womanly—I thought not.

"Do you know what I have been troubling my head about?" she said, coming suddenly to a full stop.

"How should I know?" was my rejoinder.

"I have been agitating for your companionship at Edinburgh," she said; "telling my aunt that with you to take care of me, I should go on more steadily and surely. What did I want with you?—above every prim faced woman in the world!"

"My advice in times of difficulty or of distraction."

"I object to advice—and yours, I particularly dislike. No, I wanted to tease you—some one to worry into an early grave with my whims and caprices."

"But you will always be amiable and lovable now?"

"So long as I stop in Edinburgh—to be sure. But it is hard that my maid and you are both to be left behind, and that my aunt will always be

companion, friend, and everything else. I told my aunt that I was afraid I should be a great trouble to her; and had it not been for papa harassing himself about the Hall being left entirely to servants, you would have accompanied us. Never mind, Bertha, I'll write to you by every post!"

"I daresay you will!"

"I'll become a regular correspondent, and you must excuse my spelling—Miss Castle never could keep my spelling in order. You shall have all the news—good, bad and indifferent. I hope I shall never come back here."

"Thank you for nothing, Isabel."

"I hope that the Hall will be sold off, and you sent for to take care of me. By the way," looking very intelligent with a new idea, "if I make myself particularly unmanageable, they are sure to send for you. Pa I can worry into a nervous fever in one evening, and aunt will grow heartily tired of me, though she will never confess it, but telegraph quietly for you."

"Pray do not think of any wickedness of that character, Bel!"

"Ah! now Bertha Goodbody is going to deliver a sermon on the evils resulting from false appearances; and Bel Badbody is not going to listen to it at any price this morning—and so, *addio*!"

Isabel walked out of the room. Two hours afterwards she sought me again, flushed and passionate, with all her smiles quenched from her dark face.

"I can't pack those tiresome boxes, and Emma is an idiot, and only confuses everything! I shall leave half the things behind I wish to take—and spoil the other half!"

"Shall I help you?"

"There's a good soul—I'm sorry that I called you names—only my high spirits. Come along, dear."

I helped her to pack her boxes—so my last act was of service to her, and rendered her grateful.

They went away after luncheon in the travelling carriage, with the boxes heaped upon the roof. Mr. Mannington trotted in and out of the house about fifty times more often than there was any occasion, and worried the postilion and the servants with inquiries. He turned to me at last.

"You are left in charge, Miss Casey, and it's a great responsibility," he said. "Pray keep the servants as straight as you can—be hard with them, and all that. Keep them down, Miss Casey; nothing like it. Try and——"

"Perhaps you will leave the mistress of the house to give her last directions," said his sister. "I am not aware that I am a nonentity at present."

"I beg pardon," said Mr. Mannington, sinking into abject deference at once; "it only struck me that you might forget something."

"I have a retentive memory," she replied, "it will not betray me in this instance. Do you mind getting into the carriage—I am very sick of seeing you caper about the passages."

"I'll get in directly, Charlotte."

Mr. Mannington having withdrawn, she turned to me.

"You will have this house to take care of—that is all I need say to you," she said.

"I have been housekeeper before this, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Yes—and a good one too, I have been told. Any commands for Edinburgh?"

"If my brother——"

"I shall not see him," she interrupted.

"I have no commands then, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Then good morning. Be prepared for me and mine at any hour of the day or night. I am not particular about the method of my flittings to and fro."

"A pleasant journey, Mrs. Kingsworth—a pleasant holiday."

"*Holiday!*"

Her face changed I thought, and even her eyes flashed. It was momentary, and I might have been deceived, she turned away so quickly from me. I followed her to the carriage, kissed Isabel once more, and shook hands with Mr. Mannington.

He held my hand in his longer than was necessary, and I looked up at him surprised. There was a new expression on that deeply lined countenance, and I could not fathom it. I even shrank away a little, as though it foreboded evil to me.

"I wish you had been going with us, Miss Casey—you would have liked to see all Edinburgh friends," he said in a low tone.

He showed all his teeth at me from the carriage window, and that was the last impression left upon me of the departure from the Hall.

This is one year's chronicle.

CHAPTER II.

ALONE.

THE house was dull after their departure. It reminded me of the Corkcutters' Hall in its extent and loneliness—its echoing passages and rooms yawning with the desolateness of their own position. The Corkcutters' Hall "with a difference," for in the old City house I had no servants to wait on me, no garden to escape into, or library to distract me, and in the first days of my new position I was not unhappy.

It was very dull at the Hall then, but I was not without friends in Wilthorpe; Richard Stewart I saw frequently, and Mr. Crease and Mr. Gapwing considered that they were taking pity on my loneliness by calling at the Hall, the latter by asking me to the Vicarage once a week, where I took

tea with Mrs. Gapwing, and heard the latest village news. At home I had still Emma for companion —she had never liked Mrs. Kingsworth's servants, and she sought my society more often now that Bel Mannington was away from her.

She sought it under protest, as it were, never stealing into the drawing or dining-room, but coming upon me in the morning in Mrs. Kingsworth's study, or at night in my room where I had had so many receptions in my time. I had never been able to comprehend the depth of Emma Eaves's affection for me, or whether she preferred me to her mistress. She was a girl who entered but little into the state of her feelings, unless violently distressed, and I had no wish to arouse in her any fresh excitement. I thought that there had been a falling off in her affection, and that a little more evidence of gratitude for past efforts in her cause might not have been out of place; but still I kept my interest in her, and watched her narrowly. I had not forgotten her old threat on the day my brother John had left for Edinburgh.

"It's like some one dead in this place," she said

to me once; "I wish they would come back again, or send for me."

"I have received a letter from Mrs. Kingsworth this morning—she talks of coming home very shortly now."

"I wonder what kind of maid Miss Mannington has found in Scotland—whether she'll fancy her, and bring her back with her?"

"You like Miss Mannington?"

"Yes."

It was the second time that Emma Eaves had confessed to this. A more jealous woman than I, standing in my place—that is, a woman jealous about small things, and what a miserable specimen of humanity that is!—would have asked if Miss Mannington were liked better than herself, and striven hard for a satisfactory rather than a truthful answer. I did not put the question, although it suggested itself with wonderful force—I was possessed by the conviction of having lost her affection; and yet had there been nothing else in the way, my pride would have prevented me becoming inquisitor. And as the days passed by, weeks became months, and the autumn stole upon us, she

began to fret for Isabel; I was assured that the wayward heiress stood first in her regard. Well, Isabel was younger than I, and less inclined to stand upon her dignity, perhaps—why should I feel aggrieved about a change of mind in Emma Eaves? I had another love to keep, and estimate, and think about, and all troubles were made of snow, whilst that endured, and I was sure of *him*.

His letters came not quite so often to me after the first year of our engagement, but I knew that business increased at Edinburgh, and the letters that he *did* write were always like himself, frank, straightforward, and affectionate. He had a trust in me which nothing was likely to shake, and he expected an unfailing confidence in return. He had it, surely!

His letters never troubled me, but after awhile Miss Mannington's did. They were as wild and incomprehensible as their writer. This in the autumn time, when I had begun to wish their return, and to look for it day after day. For the first time that I could remember, Bel expressed herself satisfied with everything in Edin-

burgh—she wished no further change, she was in love with the dear city, and she had made many friends there. "Mr. Stewart—my aunt's antipathy," she wrote, "I have met more than once. Such a great man in these parts, my dear—I am quite bewildered by the height of the pedestal on which he is standing. And—but keep this ever a secret from my aunt—I like him very much, and only wish that I was old enough to fall in love with him!"

A *naïve* confession, and like her girlish self—a confession, only that once made to me, and to which I took an objection on the spot. Her letters were few and far between, but I waited for them very anxiously now; I heard of absent friends by their means, and I was not likely to be jealous because she saw Mr. Stewart frequently, and I remained at home, isolated and depressed.

Her next letter was wild and incoherent; she had been visiting again—she was tired to death, but could not sleep. She had been to a ball—a grand public ball, for the first time, with her aunt as *chaperon*. She had "come out;" that was her legitimate *début*, she considered.

Only in a postscript was my lover's name mentioned.

"Think of my opening the ball with Mr. Stewart!—and he not too great and grand for me! I am getting quite used to him, Bertha. We are very gay here."

Mr. Stewart's next letter made no allusion to this ball—to his meeting with Mrs. Kingsworth, her niece, and Mr. Mannington. It was a very incomprehensible letter in its turn, and did uot dwell so much upon the future as I could have desired. It was in reply to mine, and it responded to the questions I had put to him somewhat methodically. Concerning my brother John he spoke more hopefully—that was the brightest portion of his letter.

"Settling down to one pursuit has made him more happy, I fancy," he wrote; "but he may break away from desk-work, and be a disreputable *brother* after all."

That was the only allusion to our future in those four pages, and I set myself to study them, and thought that there *was* something different in their midst, if I could only find it out.

Setting down to study a letter intently is a disagreeable process, if you be not satisfied with the style of the writer. There are more things discovered than were ever intended, and one can build a story from the mere fragments of misty suppositions. After awhile the letter absolutely distressed me—I could see so much in it! He had written it hurriedly; therefore he had been in a hurry to finish it, and shake me from his mind! He had written it absently; he who wrote so clearly and precisely had drawn his pen through several words which had no sense in them, I discovered, on careful disinterment; he had been struggling with other thoughts, which had beset him whilst he wrote. I was certain of it!

I put the letter away with a sigh, at last; I felt that my rigid scrutiny was not fair to him, and that I was in a captious mood, when a little disturbed me. Life alone in a great house did not suit me now—it rendered me peevish and uneasy; I had lived out one old habit, and learned to feel restless and discontented in my new estate. But I looked at the diamond hoop upon my finger—I always wore it, now I had the house to myself—

and forgot all my foolish thoughts at once. I went back to the real life which I believed in, and the bright retrospect chased away the shadows.

But things were altering for all that—and I felt that *something* was going to happen in one direction or another. I was getting superstitious gradually.

CHAPTER III.

MASTER RICHARD STEWART GETS MYSTERIOUS.

MASTER RICHARD STEWART transacted the greater part of his business with Mrs. Kingsworth by letter. The business which he conducted in Wilthorpe went on as well without my patroness as with her. Richard Stewart reigned absolutely, and there was no disputing his word. When he had first been land-bailiff it had been attempted once or twice, and refractory tenants, or gamekeepers, or landowners, had trudged to the Hall with their complaints. They had objected to Richard Stewart's decisive tone; his brusque air had not pleased everybody—to the last day of his life it never did—and they had appealed to the fountain-head, and been severely snubbed for their officiousness.

"What do you think I have engaged Mr. Stewart for, if I am to be annoyed by your frivolous maunderings? Take yourselves away, and do not trespass on my property any more, or I'll let the dogs loose."

These people began to understand that they must give way to Richard Stewart; that there were no more chances of telling a good story, and "getting off" some rent or task, as there had been in the days of his father, who had been also land-bailiff to the Kingsworth estate.

Therefore business at Wilthorpe went on as usual —those who had to work and were in any remote degree connected with Richard Stewart's supervision, laboured as well as usual; the money which he collected, as agent to Mrs. Kingsworth, was paid regularly into the Woundell Bank to Mrs. Kingsworth's account; it never rusted more than twenty-four hours in that iron safe which was built in his cottage wall. He was proud of his accuracy in money matters, for he was a true Stewart. Had he gone fortune-hunting, like his brother, he would have made a fortune also; but he was a contented

man, and one of the few true "countrymen" left who despise the life of cities.

He had always prophesied that city life would kill his brother, and though he had found a difference between Edinburgh and London, he was not quite reconciled to any new belief.

"Mark was country born and bred, and ought to have stopped here if he had preferred health to money," he said to me once; "and there's only one thing gives me any hope about him."

"What is that?"

"That he'll make money very fast, and come back to enjoy himself in a country house hereabouts. I think that I shall be Mark's land-bailiff some day—I'm looking forward to that time with all my heart."

I wondered what he was looking forward to when six months of the second year had passed and he had become suddenly grave and thoughtful. I asked him, and he laughed defiantly almost, and retorted.

"That's a subterfuge, Miss Bertie—why, you have become grave and thoughtful yourself, and wish to distract attention by a countercharge!"

"I grave and thoughtful, Mr. Richard!"

"For the last month you have not been yourself —you look worried."

"Nonsense," I replied, "what should I have to worry me?"

"Oh! there are those confounded servants at the Hall—they would worry the patience out of a Job. I never agreed with the lot there—male or female—and it always offered me inexpressible satisfaction to take them down a peg or two. I'll just tell you how I served your last London footman who came to Wilthorpe to astonish us. If I didn't astonish him, my name is not Stewart."

He dashed into an anecdote illustrative of the new subject which he had ingeniously contrived to introduce, and so eluded the old topic that had aroused my curiosity. I only remembered that he had become a little singular when I saw him in his pew at Wilthorpe Church on the following Sunday, and noted a something different yet indefinable in his looks.

He was not thoughtful, however, at this time—and he made me uncomfortable and inattentive by the watchful gaze he kept on me whenever the

form of service brought my head above the pew. He waited for me outside the church, as he waited every Sunday now, morning and evening, much to the enjoyment of the village gossips, who built a story out of our meetings, and seized upon that idea which Mrs. Kingsworth had had long before them.

Every one in Wilthorpe thought Richard Stewart was going to marry Miss Casey! To have attempted a general denial of so popular an impression, would have been an impossible task; no one would have believed us out of our own immediate circle. Mr. Gapwing asked me once if the rumour were true, and I assured him to the contrary. Mrs. Gapwing was anxious about it, doubted my assurances, and thought in her heart that I was very sly upon the subject; Mr. Crease, blushing like a peony, even stammered forth a similar inquiry, and was also balked of those congratulations which he had evidently prepared for me. Two out of the three probably believed my denial, but the villagers had their own opinions, and no efforts of mine would have had power to confute them.

Richard Stewart waited for me that Sunday evening as usual then, and we walked down the grass-bordered road, with the Wilthorpians looking after us. It was the last Sunday evening service we were to have, it had been announced —afternoon devotions were to be duly observed until the days "drew out" again.

"Have you heard from Mark lately?" he asked before we were out of earshot of all those good folk who had forgotten the sermon in their interest of us.

"A week ago, I had a letter."

"He is well, I hope?"

"Have you not heard from him? I thought that you and he were regular correspondents."

"He has found some one with whom it is more agreeable to correspond than a country brother."

This was an evasion, I felt assured. He did not speak with his eyes looking straight into one's own, fearless and unabashed. It was not even the voice of Richard Stewart, but a husky utterance unworthy of him.

"Then you have not heard from him?"

"Yes I have," he said sharply at last.

We walked on together in silence for awhile, both full of thoughts unakin to anything we had heard at Wilthorpe Church, and therefore both no better than the congregation I have just blamed for mundane curiosity.

"I asked if he were well, because I don't believe he is," said Richard; "because the last letter isn't like one of Mark's—there!"

"What was in it that disturbed you—may I see it?"

"No, you mayn't."

"Very well," I answered; "of course I have no right. But you know, best of all, that anything which concerns, or affects him, is of more than common importance to me."

"Yes—I know," he said absently.

When our paths diverged, he said, "Good night," somewhat coldly, and I went more sorrowfully than I had ever done at Wilthorpe up the long shadowy walk towards the Hall. I was nearing home when he came after me at a rapid pace.

"Miss Bertha," he said, "I have brought the letter."

"I do not wish to read it, if you have any objection."

"You have the right—there it is," he answered; "you may make it out better than I—you have a quicker intellect."

"And I read it with your full consent?"

He paused again.

"No," he replied.

"Then I'll not look at it."

"I am glad that you have decided thus," he said, hastily tearing it to pieces, lest I should repent my decision, which I did the very instant the fragments were strewing the path; "there was no end to gain by its perusal—it was a mere business letter, in which your name was scarcely mentioned."

"Scarcely! Then he mentioned me?"

"To be sure—he always says, 'Love to Bertie,' in his usual free-and-easy way," he said, scattering the last pieces from his hand; "nothing more. Only you wished to see the letter—you were offended with me, and I came after you, despite——"

"Despite what?"

"Despite my common sense—that's all. Good night."

"Stay one moment—*he* asked you in that letter not to tell me of its contents."

"Confound——"

"I am sure he did, by your manner. Well, it was a business letter, and I am a woman with no interest in anything that affects his business world, he thinks—I am sorry for that thought! He does not understand me so well as I could wish."

"Yes he does," was the flat contradiction here.

"He cannot, Mr. Richard," I murmured.

"Don't say that. He understands everything too well—it would have been better for him if his perceptive faculties had been somewhat less acute. Better for you and me perhaps, who may have to suffer with him."

"Oh! is he ill?—has anything happened in business?—is it concerning money?"

"No—no—nothing of the kind, except that he may not be quite well. Good night—God bless you!"

He turned from me, and fairly ran away down the avenue—he was fearful, evidently, that I should

question him too closely. I went home and commenced at once a long letter to my sweetheart; I told him, in the fulness of my heart, everything that had happened, and asked if I were justified in asking for an explanation? I feared that he was ill or unhappy, for his brother, a far-seeing man, whom trifles disturbed not, was evidently troubled also. Would he tell me?—would he give me some assurance that all was well with him at Edinburgh?

The answer came by the return post, and should have been satisfactory enough—nay, was so, on first reading. It was only the afterwards!

He wrote a long letter in return; he was not quite well; he had been working harder than usual, sitting up at nights, and struggling for more money in divers ways; but there was nothing to disturb either his brother, him, or me. In a few months he should see me and explain more fully; in a few months he hoped to come to Wilthorpe, and carry me away for good to his Edinburgh home; he was heartily sick of single blessedness, and the fusty old housekeeper who tyrannized over him. There were shadows to scare away, and the

brightness of my presence might do it, nothing else. He looked forward; he was happy in his future; I might take one assurance to my heart, that all was well, and that there was nothing could more greatly trouble him than my belief to the contrary.

Yes—what more could he say than that? I went rejoicing with my letter to Richard Stewart, and placed it in his hand. He leaned against the door-post of his cottage, and read the letter in the sunshine, whilst I stood and watched his face, and thought it should have brightened up as mine had.

But if there were any change in that determined face it was a slight contraction of the thick brows, and a slight compression of the lips; it was not the bright readable face that I had ever known.

When he had perused the letter he met my studious gaze, and *tried* to look pleased at the news.

"He cannot say more than that, Miss Bertie. What a brave fellow he is! How I wish that he were here!"

"We shall see him shortly."

"Yes—oh! yes! Are you going into the village?"

"I am going district visiting. This is my mission-day."

"Ah! they tell me—those old decrepit and unbearable old women—that there's no one like the good young lady at the Hall. I should think not, if you can stand all their miserable whining and hypocrisy."

"Is that quite a fair verdict on the poor?"

"On one-half of the Wilthorpe poor, at any rate. They're a mean lot—and I object to poor people in any shape and form! But then I object to most things," he said with his old laugh; "even to Miss Casey, when she robs me of my time like this."

"After which hint—good morning."

"Good morning."

He nodded his head to me, and went into his cottage. But when I had got a long way down the road, and had stopped for an instant to exchange a few words with Mr. Crease, I was aware that Richard Stewart was back again at his door, by the remark of the curate's, who stood with his face that way.

"There's Mr. Stewart at home, I see—and I wished to ask him not to press the rent at Dame Higgins'. Good morning, Miss Casey."

He raised his hat in his usual courteous, but embarrassed fashion, and we went our separate ways. Later in the day—close upon three in the afternoon—I returned to the Hall, repaired to my room, changed my dress, re-read and locked up Mark's last letter, and went down into the drawing-room, there to wait till dinner was announced to me.

I started very much upon entering, for lying full-length upon the couch, with a white handkerchief over his head, was the unmistakable Mr. Mannington. The opening of the door aroused him, for I had scarcely entered when he twitched the handkerchief from his face, and sat up with his hand upon his chest.

"What a state you have thrown me into—just as I was trying to compose myself after that long, wearisome journey," he said in that nervous fretful manner which was characteristic of him when ill-pleased; "but I hope that you are well, Miss Casey?"

"Quite well, thank you, sir."

He rose and shook hands with me, then dropped listlessly into his corner of the couch, and complained of his heart-burn and his head-ache.

"Mrs. Kingsworth and Isabel are well, I trust, sir?"

"Very well indeed, thank you. Oh! dear! I wish I could say the same!"

"And when may we expect their return?"

"Heaven knows, my dear Miss Casey; I am in the dark! I am not the herald of their advent—I have merely run down here to make sure that all is going on as well as could be wished. I return to-morrow."

"Indeed!"

"Any news?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Joseph never found that bootjack of mine, I suppose?"

"I have not heard him mention an article of that description."

"I daresay not—it's like him! I told him when we went away, if he didn't find it, I would procure

his discharge, and, by Gad! I will too. How's Richard Stewart?"

"Very well, sir."

"Oh! he's always *well*—I didn't want to know if his face were as red or his eyes as protuberant as ever, Miss Casey. How is he getting on—as pushing and energetic and *bumptious* as ever, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," I reiterated.

"I shall keep that man when anything happens," he said, in a lower tone, rubbing one thin hand over the other.

"I beg your pardon?" I said, interrogatively.

"I did not speak, Miss Casey," he answered, "I didn't say a word—I was thinking of some one in Edinburgh—thinking aloud, he! he! What hour is dinner fixed for?"

"Five, sir."

"I should like to rest till then, if you will excuse me. I am really very much knocked up."

I excused Mr. Mannington, and withdrew. At five o'clock he entered the dining-room, with his usual exactitude, dressed with his usual regard for ceremony, and looking quite a dapper little

gentleman, in his dress-coat and white neckcloth. Though I had more than once distrusted him, though I had been more than once warned of him, I was glad to see one home-face back in its place that night. It was something like the old times again.

He ate a very hearty dinner, saying but little during the meal. He had been travelling part of the night, and all the early morning, he took occasion to inform me. After dinner he quickly followed me into the drawing-room, bringing with him a decanter and glass.

"You will excuse this, Miss Casey?" he said; "but I have been recommended port wine, and my system has been shaken very much lately by escorting my daughter to a variety of places. They are gay folk in Edinburgh."

"Isabel does not complain, sir."

"No, she is happy enough, and that makes amends for all. She is wonderfully improved, you will say, Miss Casey."

"When shall I have the opportunity of saying it, sir?"

"I can't tell you, indeed; I said so before dinner,

if you remember. I should not be very much surprised if Mrs. Kingsworth did not sell off here, and settle in Edinburgh for good. I have had the idea before this—haven't you?"

"No, sir."

"Oh! you haven't?" he said, greatly relieved by my answer, which it struck me then that he had seemed anxious to elicit. "So much the better, for it's a pity to sell off family estates—there are an importance and character about them. You like Wilthorpe, Miss Casey?"

"Yes, sir—very much."

"I thought so—you would like Edinburgh, though?"

I thought, in my turn, of Mark Stewart's talk of Edinburgh, and how he had puzzled me by taking it for granted that I should visit the city—he who had made up his mind then that some day I should go for good there!

"You are young, and would like more society than Wilthorpe affords. Our friend Mr. Stewart —*the* Mr. Stewart—lords it there, I can assure you."

"He is respected in Edinburgh?"

"Riches are always respected, Miss Casey," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"It is not for his money that people like Mr. Stewart, sir," I said, a little too impetuously.

I was aware of that by his cunning eyes directed towards me on the instant.

"You are right there, Miss Casey," he said, quietly enough, however, "it is not money that makes the man entirely—especially not a man as accomplished and genial as this merchant. I like him very much."

"You have changed your opinion since I saw you last, Mr. Mannington."

"Very likely," he said, filling his wine-glass, and holding it to the light; "he is a dogmatic individual, who never alters his judgment. I have seen a great deal of Mr. Stewart—he calls at our place in Edinburgh—his merits dawn upon one, after awhile. There, is not that a fair statement?"

"Yes, sir—and Mrs. Kingsworth, who——"

"Who did not like him any more than myself—oh! she and Mr. Stewart are the best of friends."

This was surprising news indeed. I showed my astonishment plainly enough, and Mr. Mannington kept his twinkling eyes fixed in my direction.

"There is a rumour in Edinburgh that he is going to be married."

I kept my blushes down better than my late astonishment.

"All the ladies who have set their caps at him so long are quite in a flutter of excitement. It's a widow lady."

"Have you seen her?" I asked, impulsively.

"Yes—but I can't believe his taste lies in that direction—upon my honour, I do not place any faith in the assertion."

He laid great stress upon his words, smiling sardonically, meanwhile. Had he solved the secret of our engagement, or was he attempting to discover it?

"He is what I call a gay man, one who pays every lady he meets considerable attention, and so raises expectations in the hearts of maidens silly enough to take every piece of flattery for gospel truth. That's only his way. My belief is, that when Mr. Stewart marries, he is too much of a

man of the world to neglect the main chance."

"What do you call the main chance?"

"Money, to be sure."

"You who profess to understand him so well now, think *that* of him? Oh! Mr. Mannington, how mistaken you are!"

Well, I had betrayed myself, perhaps, by that outburst. I could not have helped it had my life been the forfeit of the avowal; I could not sit still and tamely listen to this poor criticism of one I loved so well!

"I trust that you have not made a hero of Mr. Stewart?" he said.

"Why?—'*trust?*"

"He is a dangerous man for a girl to think too much about. I have even told Mrs. Kingsworth that I am not quite satisfied with Isabel's manner lately. They meet too often—he is at every ball in the place, night after night, and Isabel's no better."

"Isabel!" I exclaimed; "she is too young and frivolous for him, even—" I stopped abruptly, but he did not observe—or affected not to observe—it.

"Most men admire frivolous women—it's an

odd fact, but the wiser the man is, the greater probability of a simple woman securing him—that is, if she set her mind upon it. Which I should be sorry to say of Miss Mannington," he added, with one of his few-and-far-between spasms of pride.

The instant afterwards he leaned forward and looked at my hand with all that intense eagerness of curiosity in his gaze which was part and parcel of his nature.

"I beg pardon—I—I never remarked that ring before, and I'm sure it wouldn't have escaped me. Bless my soul, how very handsome!"

I was conscious of my mistake, but I made the best of the oversight.

"Yes, it is considered a handsome ring, sir," I answered, with an affectation of coolness that was not done well. All my life I was a bad hand at disguise, and is that saying much to my discredit, after all?

"May I inspect it?"

I took it from my finger—my "engaged finger!"—and placed it in his hand. He turned the ring over and over several times, held it to the wax

light nearest him on the table—held it at arms' length from him, shook it to and fro, and followed its flashes of flame with gleaming eyes. He returned it to me with quite a sigh.

"I am a great admirer of diamonds," he said; "and such diamonds as these we do not meet with every day. A princely gift, or an investment, or a family heir-loom—which?"

"You must decline my answering for the present, sir," I replied.

"Of no consequence, Miss Casey—merely a friendly question. You are embarrassed?"

I bit my lip at this, and he desisted from further remark. After one or two more glasses of wine he said he thought that he should go to his room, and rest from his long journey. He was conscious, he added, that he was not good company that evening. He left me, but he altered his mind about his room, and went downstairs into the servants' hall, to learn the news of the neighbourhood for himself, and possibly to inquire if I gave general satisfaction. I fear that his information was not greatly extended, for he had never been a favourite at the Hall, and had worried and harassed too

constantly all those with whom he had been brought in contact. Even that night he began his old charge at the backslidings of the domestics, and as I went to my room I heard his voice again raised on the boot-jack question, and Joseph's replies in angry self-defence.

The next morning he departed early from the Hall. He woke me up by tapping on the panels of the door before daylight.

"Good-bye, Miss Casey," he called outside. "I forgot to tell you last night that I had to go away very early—keep the place as straight as you can, and let us know at Edinburgh when anything goes wrong. I don't think the port wine is locked up from last night—I thought I'd mention it. It's a beautiful morning for early rising—so fresh."

I heard his teeth rattling as he went down the corridor. After he had gone away, I was at a loss to discover a sufficient reason for so long a journey and so unceremonious a departure.

CHAPTER IV.

I AM REPROVED AND ADVISED.

ONE remark of Mr. Mannington's came to me with a suddenness at breakfast-time, as though it had been uttered in my ears again. In the conversation I had had with Isabel's father, one startling remark had followed another so rapidly, and all had tended so much to confuse me, that I had been depressed by the general effect rather than one single statement. But after he had gone again, it was different. One thing remained on my memory like a brand, and it defaced all else, and made me miserable when I sat down with its grimness confronting me. Was it all true?—was it all false?—could this man possess the power to sow one seed of suspicion between Mark Stewart and me?

"He is at every ball in the place, night after night. He is what I call a gay man!"

There was no ostensible object for asserting that which might easily be refuted; it was elucidated in the general run of conversation, and yet it seemed so false to me! False it must have been, I reasoned; had I not Mark's own words to the contrary?—his own letter implying that he was ill from over-application to the task work which he had set himself, and that business, and business alone, rendered him a slave. Had not Richard Stewart read that letter, and—then a second stab was made at my heart, and I could see that face, shadowed as it were by some doubt, as the letter was held between his sunburnt hands.

"No, no, I will not distrust Mark!" I exclaimed, running away with my fingers in my ears to deaden the voice which hissed the slander at me; "why should I doubt one so good, and true, and honest, as he has ever proved himself?"

I hated Mr. Mannington that day—I lived the slander down all that week, and kept to the business of the house; but the next week—oh! the next! There came another letter to me from Isa-

bel Mannington, written in the same high-spirited, eccentric fashion, as characteristic of herself as of her letters.

"My aunt is growing tired of Edinburgh," she wrote; "I fear we shall all come hurrying back to Wilthorpe, and end the only brightness that my life has had. I have asked my aunt, but she wraps herself in her stolidity, and says nothing. Try and find out for me—write to aunt, and ask her if there be any orders to prepare the Hall for her reception, there's a dear old Bertha."

Then followed a long list of her pleasure-seekings —whom she had met, and to whom she had taken a fancy, and the reverse. Mr. Stewart's name was constantly recurring—at all fashionable reunions, private and public balls, scientific meettings, starring engagements at the theatre—always Mr. Stewart.

After this, whom was I to believe, or what construction was I to put upon the several letters I had received?—there was a little mystery somewhere. I was unsettled, even unhappy, but I had every faith in Mark Stewart; I felt that he would not attempt in any way to play me false. And yet

I wrote to him as though I doubted him. Despite my effort to the contrary, there was a woman's natural jealousy peering from the pages of my letter, as I told him of the news that I had received from other quarters, and how unsettled it made me to find people speaking of his existence as though it were a butterfly one, vapid and purposeless. I confessed that Mr. Mannington and his daughter had both alluded to him as a man who sought pleasure rather than shunned it; even in my pique—I see my error now, but he was my first love, and away from me, and I was not quite twenty years of age!—I spoke of the rumours that were rife in Edinburgh concerning his approaching marriage. I tried to make it a sensible and cool letter, and but wrote as a woman distrustful of him—as any jealous woman might have written. In his presence I could have explained better; my anxiety would have shown more, and touched his heart, not aroused his pride. I was sorry when the letter had gone; I thought of so many better, truer words, by which I might have softened my suspicions—perhaps disguised them. I waited anxiously for the answer, which came at length,

cold and cutting as a north-east wind. Here it is:

"DEAR BERTHA,

"I ask you to believe in me, not in the idle tattle of a gossip, or the folly of a school-girl. Had I time to enter into the explanations you think necessary to your peace of mind—so easily disturbed!—I have not the patience or the humility. Presently I shall be in Wilthorpe—I ask your confidence till then.

"Yours ever,

"MARK STEWART."

I read this letter over twenty times, trying to discover within it some ring of that affection he had always professed for me. But I felt reproved—humiliated. There was the sternness of one who had received an insult to his pride, who turned upon me at once, cold and hard, at the mere semblance of a doubt of his integrity. I was sorry that I had met with this rebuff, which dashed the weapon from my hand, and then turned the point against myself. I was vexed that I had suspected him; that he had thought it is duty to ask for a

respect which my own heart had seemed to deny him. I was vexed, above all, that he had not understood me better, and seen my woman's love amidst the nervous questions which had stung him. He had seen nothing but the error I had committed, and he had judged me unmercifully for that! I spread the letter before me, and held my head between my hands to stare at it, till the tears welled from my eyes upon the paper, and all was lost in rain.

Possibly I was never happy after that day; the cold stern letter lay between me and the brighter hopes I had had once. On my path in life rested ever that shadow which I could not set aside. His letter had reproved me, wounded me, but it had not strengthened my faith in his affection. If he had loved me as I thought, would he have written so cruel a letter, adding not one word to make the whole less bitter? Was it natural?—was it like him? All the past that had irritated me might have been as false as rumours are, but it did not soothe me to consider in what manner he had thought it necessary to check my womanly inquiry. Had he never loved me?—had it been a passing

fancy born of inaction in a quiet English village, to meet its natural death in the higher world wherein he moved, and was looked up to by so many?

I fell into this morbid train of thinking at last, and a month after the letter had been received—that I did not answer, and had not the heart to answer—the wound which it had inflicted on me was none the less acute.

It was the end of October when that letter was a month old. I had seen but little of Richard Stewart during that month; it had already suggested itself to me that he was not so anxious as formerly to hold converse with me—that there was even a difference in *him!*

With my sadness had arisen a new wild spirit that had no name, but which kept me restless and ever on defence. When the impression deepened upon me that Richard Stewart had even altered, I resolved to seek him out, and at least clear away a part of the mystery which seemed thickening around me. For two Sundays he had not appeared at church, and on the third he sat in his old place, paler than his wont. He did not wait for me in

the churchyard, but hurried away, and it was not till the middle of the week that I met him accidentally in the country-road whereon I had parted from his brother last. There was no escape, if he had wished for one, and he came towards me with a face somewhat flushed, I fancied. Heigho! I was very full of fancies just then.

"Well, Mr. Richard, I have been trying to think lately in what way I have offended you."

"You might have thought long enough, then," he answered with his usual abruptness.

"Might I? Why?"

"Because you have never offended me in my life, and are not likely to begin now."

"Then you bear me no ill-will?"

"Ill—will—be—hanged!" he said after a struggle with a more formidable verb; "what made you think of this folly?"

"You have evaded me lately."

"Have I?" said he colouring, despite his efforts to look cool and at his ease; "what nonsense!"

"Something that you have heard from Edinburgh stands between me and you—as it stands between me and *him*? What is it?"

"What have you heard?" he asked in a louder and more surprised tone.

"I have heard nothing from him that reminds me of his old self!"

"And so imagination steps in, and haunts you like an evil spirit—that's womanly, at any rate."

"Don't run away from my question, Mr. Richard. Tell me instead why you have been running away—hiding away—from me?"

"I'll not own that I have done so," he said sternly.

Until that time I had never seen him look so fierce and stern.

"I am sorry for that—I had hoped that you might have trusted me."

"I would trust you with my life, Miss Bertha!" he exclaimed energetically; "but I cannot explain, for all that. Try and think that my head is turned a little with a trouble I can't shake off, but that I shall be better in good time, if you will only wait, like me, patiently for the result."

"This is your own trouble, then?"

"Yes."

"I beg your pardon, sir," I said, "I had believed

that it was your brother's, and that perhaps I had a right to know it."

"No—you hadn't," he said moodily.

"Troubles seem on their way to Wilthorpe, Mr. Stewart," I said. "I may be over-despondent, but they seem advancing towards me in my turn."

"Have you heard from Mark?"

"A month since."

"And his last letter has troubled you—oh! don't mind that," he said, with more earnestness than I could account for.

"You do not know it's purport?" I asked curiously.

"No—I—I cannot know anything of his love-letters," he stammered. "Don't ask me to explain anything—it's not in my way."

"Mr. Richard—I must tell you!" I exclaimed. "You are my only friend here—you are his brother, and know him so much better than I. Is it likely that he has repented of his hasty offer? Is he one of those whose great incentive to love or fame is the pursuit?"

"Miss Casey!" he cried more sternly and fiercely than ever. The pride of the Stewarts resented the

assertion, and I was always in the wrong!

"Well—I am unhappy—I cannot understand his last letter—it is neither kind nor just to me."

"I did not know you were excitable," he said, looking at me very earnestly; "I read your character very differently, when we first became acquainted with each other."

"I was happy then."

"Not now?"

"Not now!"

"Poor girl!" he muttered.

"Oh! sir, I do not want your pity!" I cried passionately; "I can pity myself, and learn to be strong without such sympathy as yours."

"Thank you," he said, "I am glad to hear that —I had no need to look in your face, and not be sure that you were a brave woman. You give me courage, too."

He spoke of courage, yet his voice began to falter strangely.

"I will go back with you—my business this way is not important," he said, turning and walking by my side; "and I have a little advice to offer you."

"Advice!"

"To be refused or taken, according to your pleasure—will you hear it?"

"Yes."

I glanced at him nervously. Was the clue to the far-off mystery in the North likely to be snatched at from his counsel? It appeared so from his embarrassment. He walked by my side for a long way in silence; he struggled very hard to arrive at a proper beginning to his speech. I could see his chest labouring and his lips moving nervously. And this man had seemed made of iron!

"Did you ever change your mind, Miss Casey?" he asked at last.

"Yes," I answered; "I am a woman."

"Pardon me," he said gravely, "but I am in no mood for irony, and I do not admire it in you. Listen to me as if you were my sister—as if I were a brother who loved you very dearly, and would set her happiness before his own in everything."

I bowed my head to the reproof. It was just enough, and his new manner was touching, and went home.

"I have changed my mind, then, not lightly, not in a hurry, upon one point," he said. "Can you guess it?"

"On my fitness to be your brother's wife. Don't hesitate—you mean that?"

I was deeply wounded, and I spoke out. This time he did not seem to heed my excited manner.

"No. On his fitness to be your husband. Keep quiet—give me a little time to breathe—will you?"

I was quiet. I walked on with trembling steps, waiting my monitor's further speech. When he spoke again it was in a new sad way, that brought the tears into my eyes.

"I am speaking of one with whom I never exchanged an angry word, whom I pray God to bless every night, just as my mother taught me to pray for him and her when I was a little boy. I am speaking against him, and it wrings my heart a little—for I don't think anything in the world would lead him to speak ill of me! But I see it all plainly enough, though I have tried to shut my eyes," he said, stretching out his hands as though to embrace the dark prospect that lay before him,

"and I feel that you and he have made a great mistake in this engagement."

"On what grounds do you base so grave a doubt?"

"I cannot say. I cannot only see that he is not fit for you—I may see presently that you are not fit for him, I cannot tell—and I am sure that you and he will find no happiness together *now*!"

"What has altered us? Why keep the proof back by which I might be guided? Is that fair?"

"No, unfair—but I have no power to say more. I am neither a spy nor a traitor."

"You would be glad to hear that I had given your brother up?"

"I ask you for the sake of your own happiness, Miss Casey."

"Let him ask me himself—if his thoughts be yours, and his love has died out for me. He has only to ask, and he alone has the right!"

"He will never ask you."

"Then I will ask him what stands between him and the love he talked of once? Ask if he can explain the reason for this cruel advice of yours?"

"Betray the confidence that I have placed in you—and set him against me. Is that quite fair?"

"No—but let me ask you, Mr. Stewart, if you have thought so meanly of me as to believe that, without one explanation, I would follow this strange counsel?"

"I have hoped that you would. Better to give him up now, than six months hence to do so—or, worse still, to marry him. I ask you, Miss Bertie—let me go back to the name that has grown familiar to me—to remember that you have elicited this advice from my lips by your doubts of my brother's constancy. You stand on his defence now, but a little while since and it was an attack."

"Have I not said that I am uneasy concerning him—that his last letter was a cruel one—that his silence is more cruel still."

"I do not judge you—I can understand you," he said softly. "I was only offering an explanation of the reason for the advice that I have given."

"That advice you had intended to offer me, at one time or another?"

"It might have died with me, before I should have mustered the courage, had it not been for your own unhappiness," he answered; "but I had thought of it, and I—well, I have not had the nerve to face you with it, that's the truth! My brother Mark is the soul of honour, but he is not fit for you—you may be fit for him, but the future must determine that. There, let me go. In trying to advise, I have made affairs more incomprehensible. I might have thought that when I began," he added, with an angry stamp of his foot.

"You have made me more unhappy still."

"I am sorry," he said suddenly; "try and think that away, then—go back to yesterday, and set all down as a dream. Why not? I asked you when we met first to wait for the result. After all——"

"Go on."

"After all, I am only a man with an opinion of my own, that is hard to shake, and I may change my mind again. I'll try my hardest—good-bye."

He turned, and went back along the country road whereon I had met him first. I went

homewards with his words ringing in my ears, becoming more of a warning to me with every minute fleeting by. Through the glass darkly loomed a something difficult to comprehend—its shadow on my way presaged the after-time, when, face to face with it, I should live it down or sink. He had meant well, but he had only rendered matters worse. I could not doubt him—and his brother, who had asked me to be his wife, I tried hard not to doubt! From either brother a few words might have ended all for better, for worse; and both were silent and mysterious, and left me in uncertainty.

I felt that I had been wronged—that no one had a right to keep me in this suspense which had gathered round me—that I had not been fairly treated by Mark or Richard Stewart. I reasoned myself into this, went home and opened my desk impetuously. I would write to Mark again, and ask if he thought me a child to be kept in the dark, or a woman in whom he feared to place his confidence.

I began—then the letter he had written last, cold, defiant and unjust, rose up before me, and I could not brook another like it, and not cast him off. I would not risk a second reproof, but would

wait for him, and judge by our first meeting what he thought of me.

I knew how much I loved him then, and how hard it would be to part with him, when I closed my desk like a coward, folded my arms upon it, and gave way!

CHAPTER V.

"AN OPEN CONFESSION."

WHEN the winter had set in, when it was the end of November, they came back to the Hall. Without notice of arrival, and in the same eccentric fashion as they had departed, there arrived by a lumbering vehicle hired at Peterborough, Mrs. Kingsworth, her brother, and her niece.

From my window I had seen the fly heaped up with luggage, and my heart leaped again with joy at the prospect of home as it had been before they went away. Mrs. Kingsworth's studied immobility, her niece's variable and trying moods, and the fidgetness of Mr. Mannington, were all parts of home, to be welcomed after so long a seclusion. I ran into the hall to receive them, and to congratulate them upon their return, and I waited

under the porch, as two years and a half since they had waited for me.

I can see their faces now, as they advanced towards me. I remember looking down upon aunt and niece, and thinking that Edinburgh had greatly aged them both. Mrs. Kingsworth was looking worn and haggard, scarcely like herself. Surely it was with a gait more feeble and a form far less erect that she toiled up the broad steps towards me? She was leaning on her niece's arm for support, and Isabel, fatigued by her journey, might have represented a woman some four or five and twenty years of age, rather than a girl of seventeen.

A long journey began before daylight could not account for all this evidence of wear and tear. Aunt and niece had been living a gay life, and here was the result, and—the moral!

"Home again, Miss Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth, reaching out a hand to me; "the poet was right enough—there's no place like it!"

She pressed my hand, then took my arm instead of her niece's, changing her stick from her right hand to her left.

"You are taller, and suit me better," she said; "excuse my selfishness."

"I am glad to see you back again."

"Thank you. *You* would not say anything you did not mean, I know."

"And are you not glad to see me back again also?" cried Isabel, flinging her arms round my neck and kissing me; "to congratulate me on my better self, my better looks, and everything else!"

"Yes—very glad to see you."

"Oh! I am dreadfully tired—somebody tell the men to look after the boxes and my shawl in the carriage—and send the right things to the right rooms at once. Where's Emma?—how tiresome that she is never in the way when she's wanted!"

She darted upstairs to her room; I looked back at Mr. Mannington, who was still burrowing in the fly with his back towards me, fishing up loose luggage. The servants by this time had assembled in the hall to bow and curtsey to their mistress, those down the steps, anxious to save Mr. Mannington trouble, were already being harassed by that gentleman's directions about the boxes.

Mrs. Kingsworth and I went at once into the

drawing-room; she drew an easy chair to the fire, sat herself down, and dropped into the old attitude —her hand upon her stick, and chin upon her hands.

"I am glad enough to get back here!" she said.

"You will not adjourn to your room at present, madam?" I inquired.

"No. Give orders about the dinner, please, and come back to me."

I did so, and returned to find her still in the same position.

"Does it strike you that I am looking well?" she said, suddenly altering her position and sitting up erect and rigid before me.

"You are looking fatigued with your journey, madam."

"I am not asking for an evasion—simply for the truth."

She took off her bonnet, and sat grey-haired and capless, staring at me, as though she were sitting for her portrait.

"No," I answered at her appeal, "you are not looking so well as when you left the Hall."

"That is nearly a year ago, and I am a woman

to whom a year is of consequence, and on whom a year tells. I am not so strong, Miss Casey, as when I left here."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"A matter to be expected, and I don't complain," she said; "I have a great deal of philosophy in me, and I shall not fret because my back grows weaker, or my steps more faltering. I have known many foolish old women who have taken as a personal affront the ills that flesh is heir to."

She unfastened her shawl and handed that and her bonnet to me.

"Fling them into the hall, and let the next servant passing do as he likes with them. I shan't want them again."

"Madam!"

"Yet awhile," she added; "don't look so horror-stricken—I am not thinking of death. I never reflect upon that, if I can help it; there's something disagreeable and depressing about it."

She subsided into her old attitude, and said, apostrophizing the fire rather than me—

"I shouldn't like to die yet, with everything so uncertain about me, and with so little knowledge

of what would become of *him*, and *her*, and—*you*. I shall grow weaker as I become older, but I shall keep my senses to the last; and when the last comes, I shall meet it bravely enough, and put in my claim for forgiveness with the rest. I don't think—that I—have been a wholly bad woman!"

"Wholly bad, Mrs. Kingsworth!—oh! no, rather——"

"Are you there?" she asked, without turning her head in my direction; "come and sit down here a moment, with an old woman who has some news for you."

I drew my chair near hers at the request.

"I have seen your brother—at a distance. He may be better or steadier in his ways—he may not be. It is difficult to understand him. I would not have you build any hopes from the calmness that hangs about his life just now—the old storm may come to your ears again at any moment."

"You do not think that he has settled down, then?" I said mournfully.

"Is it natural to expect it?"

"Perhaps not—but I *have* hoped lately."

"He has done better than I thought he would—he has even been an honest servant, Mr. Stewart tells me—ah! Mr. Stewart!"

"I have heard that that gentleman and you are better friends."

"I forgave him for your sake, when he took Kingsworth into his service," she said quietly; "I bore him no malice, and therefore it was no great effort to be friends, though, for all that, there's a great deal I dislike in that young man."

After a pause she went on again—

"I do not blame him for not being communicative—I am not of a communicative disposition myself! I asked him once the reason for taking your brother into his service, and he only laughed and said that I should know in time."

He was thinking of me then!

"When was that?" I asked eagerly.

"Two months after I had left here."

My heart sank again. At that time he thought more of me. I was sure of it.

"Mr. Mannington tells me that Mr. Stewart is very gay in Edinburgh?"

How I detested the word "gay" by this time.

What an inappropriate word it seemed to couple with a man whose energy and ability had made his fortune!

"He has risen to greatness, and seems now enjoying his high position. He is a man much sought after, and has many friends."

"You met him very frequently in company?"

"I have not been frequently in company, Miss Casey," she said; "I hope your imagination has not conceived me darting from place to place, waltzing with Mr. Stewart perhaps, with my gold-headed cane over his shoulder; or giving select balls on my account, and astonishing the *élite* by my dashing demeanour?"

"My imagination scarcely took so wide a range."

"I have been out a little—at my hotel a great deal, and I have certainly seen more life in Edinburgh during the last year than I have encountered in all my days at Wilthorpe, and that's not saying much. Perhaps I have enjoyed myself after my own fashion, and now I'm suffering for it. Have you any news for me?"

"No, madam."

"Then I'll try and doze away the rattle of the

train. If you see my brother, present my compliments and ask him to be kind enough to keep his vexations to himself till dinner-time. You will go to Isabel, Miss Casey?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You may find some improvement in her since she was here last," she said.

"The change has done her good, then?"

"I say you *may* find some improvement in her. I hope you may, with all my heart—I can't! Shut the door, please."

I withdrew, and repaired to Isabel's room, not meeting Mr. Mannington by the way, and therefore spared the delivery of Mrs. Kingsworth's uncomplimentary message to him.

I found Isabel sitting before the large toilette glass dressing for dinner, with Emma Eaves attendant on her.

"Oh! you are creeping in at last!" she cried; "and I have been expecting you this half hour. A great hurry you have been in to hear the news of the last year. Now, Em—bundle, bundle, bundle—I want to talk to Miss Casey."

Emma Eaves almost scowled at me for that in-

trusion, which had been the signal for her summary dismissal, but she withdrew as directed, taking with her a very handsome work-box, which Isabel had brought her from Scotland as a present.

"You are a good hand at back-hair," Bel said, composing herself in order again, "and I'm the biggest booby alive at plaits, and always get so cross over them. Did you ever see me cross?"

"Not for the last twelvemonths."

"Indeed, Miss Pert!" she said, trying to strike me on the elbow with the back of the hair-brush, "how very remarkable! But I'm not going to be cross to-day—I haven't been irritable, capricious, or a trouble to my friends for ever so long! How am I looking, Bertie?"

The echo of her aunt's question.

"Quite a woman."

"I am a woman," she answered sharply. "I kept my seventeenth birthday in Edinburgh, and that's the age of womanhood. Do you think that I am a child still, then?"

"No."

"Then keep your patronage—your 'quite a woman'—to your amiable self, dear," she said;

"and don't talk so much, please. I want to talk myself."

"Pray go on."

"I want to tell you what a happy—oh! my goodness! I was nearly saying 'jolly'—year I have had in Edinburgh. What a many friends we made there—friends, too, of my own age, or thereabouts, that changed my life, and made it bright and new, and as a girl's life should be. If I be a bad temper, hard to please, and hard to humour, it has been the fault of those who would have shut me up, for life, in this house."

"I cannot think that."

"There's no need for your opinion—uncalled for, and therefore postponed till further notice," she said; "that's my idea of the subject, and I have told pa so fifty times. Well, I have been happy, Bertie—for I have had my own way, very nearly."

"I am glad that the return home has not dispirited you, Bel."

"I have something to look forward to—give me something to look forward to, and I can live anywhere. Shut me out from any distant chance

of happiness, and I should go mad!—mad!"

She glared at herself in the glass, and her face darkened with the excitement of the moment. For an instant it was a mad face, and its wild expression startled me.

"It is not everyone's lot in life to see happiness ahead," I said. "What will you do when your share of trouble comes?"

"What troubles am *I* going to have?"

"Not any, I hope. But is it possible to guarantee you their exemption?"

"I suppose I should get over them as well as other people—and I shall not worry myself about them, yet awhile."

"Well—what have you to look forward to?"

"Next month, or thereabouts—on the fourth of January—the annual county ball is held at Woundell."

"You are going?"

"To be sure. Pa escorts me. Pa's fond of dancing, and of his daughter. Oh! you should see pa skip through a quadrille in the old-fashioned style, with a stout lady!"

She laughed merrily, if a little undutifully, at the reminiscence, and I could not refrain from joining her.

"What has put Woundell ball into your head so prematurely?"

"Mr. Stewart, to be sure."

"Mr. Stewart!"

My laughing was over for that day. I held my breath with suspense, and all the jealousy of my nature stole at once to my heart, and redoubled my interest in Bel Mannington's frivolity.

"Mr. Stewart will be in Wilthorpe next month —he is my partner for the first quadrille after eleven."

"Nothing like securing your partners in advance, Miss Mannington."

"Aren't you well, Bertie?" she said, looking round into my face.

"I am very well—why do you ask?"

"I thought it was a ghost's face over my head in the glass—fancy, perhaps. Fancy goes a great way! Well," settling herself again into her old position, "when he asked me if I were likely to be at the Woundell ball, I said 'Yes,' and he set

me down for his partner on the spot. What a dear man he is, Bertie!"

"You like him, then?"

"Everybody likes him in Edinburgh—everybody will like him here when he comes back again. If you were going to marry now, Bertie," she said thoughtfully, "would you object to a man twelve years older than yourself?"

"Not too great a difference, when there is true love on both sides," I answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because there is only one man in the world whom I would care to marry," she said—"only one!"

"Mr. Stewart?"

"What made you think of that!" she exclaimed in astonishment. She did not know how much she had betrayed, or how eagerly I had followed every word and every train of thought in her.

"Mr. Stewart is exactly twenty-nine."

"See to the door, that no one is listening," she said eagerly; "this is a secret between you and me for ever. I'll tell you, Bertie."

Almost unconsciously I went to the door, looked out and returned. Coming back towards her I could have shrieked out for her silence; that I was her enemy, her spy; that I was unworthy of her confidence. But I was a jealous woman, anxious to know all, and I took my place beside her. Her hair was dressed, and I had no excuse to remain longer in the background.

When I was seated near her, she put her small hands on my arms, and leaned forward, full of eagerness.

"This is a secret which no one guesses—I love that man! God knows that I am very young to think of him—scarcely more than a girl in his eyes, and that he may never have had one thought of me, and never, never will! But he is so noble, honourable, and handsome—so good to those beneath him, and so able to hold his own against those who would look down upon him for his origin—so different to everybody I have ever seen, or shall see."

"Then—then—he has said nothing? Then you have not one word, one look of encouragement to sustain you in this foolish thought?"

"He has been always kind to me—more than once he has sought me out; but—no, no, no!" she cried impulsively, "he has never thought of falling in love with me. He is too noble to marry me for any fortune that I may eventually possess, and what else is there to be seen in a dark-faced dwarf like me! Oh! if I had only been a beautiful woman!—if I could have been like you—like anyone, anything but my wretched ugly self!"

She sprang from me, to dash her hands upon the table and send the toilette ware right and left; to turn again and fling herself upon me, sobbing in a passionate abandonment. I was moved by her excitability; but she was at an age when romance is struck out from real life, and heroes rise and fall, and rapidly succeed each other, till the "real one" comes upon the scene—above all, she was my rival; and my heart steeled itself against her weakness, and could not pity her.

"This Mr. Stewart has no idea of your thoughts towards him, Isabel?" I asked.

"No. That is not likely."

"Unsought, you must not seek him, or the evil to follow may last for all your life. Think

less of him and more of your self-respect—it will be better for you."

"How cold and hard you are!" she moaned.

"There finish your dressing; let me call your maid and go away. I cannot sympathize with a girl so young as yourself making up her mind to love a man who will never care for her. You must live this down."

"I shall not try," was the defiant answer.

"You must."

"I would rather live single all my life and think of him, than marry a prince!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot.

"All rhodomontade," I said, almost too contemptuously; "if you nurse these thoughts, they will do you harm. This Mr. Stewart is engaged —do you hear?—engaged!"

"I don't believe it!"

I had meant to tell her all my story, and thus to save her from herself. To give her time to calmly reflect upon the current of events which had set her apart from him, and placed me at his side. For I was still his, until he told me of his great mistake. Then came her indignant reply,

full of confidence as well as anger, and back with a rush followed all the old suspicions I had had of Mark.

"Why, do you not believe me?" I asked.

"His friends speak of his engagement; but he does not act like a man who has a thought of a wife—he is not a man who would be ashamed to tell the world of his future marriage. And he is coming three hundred miles to dance with me at Woundell."

"Ah! I had forgotten that," I said, recoiling from her as though she had offered to strike me; "I cannot reason with you—I do not understand the case. You know best what hopes you have to build upon."

I went out of the room, with my heart swelling and my lips trembling with anger. I might have been deceived by this man of whom she had spoken, or all might bear the sunlight on it yet. I must have patience and wait.

Then I thought—and the thought brought me to a full stop—that this weak-minded girl might be deceived by his fair words in her turn, and I knew that she had neither the strength nor the pride to

bear up against a disappointment such as might be waiting for me.

I went back to her room, took her in my arms, and said,

"You are too young, Bel—try and think less of this, and of him. Don't, with your own rash thoughts, lay the foundation of a whole life's misery. He is not fit for you—nor you for him!"

Then I went away to my own room, and dressed for dinner.

CHAPTER VI.

PREPARATION.

ALL this while no letter from Mark Stewart—no fairer, kinder words to bring hope nearer to me, and keep the bitter thoughts away. I could take no warning from his letter; it stood between me and him, an evidence of his pride—nothing more.

And the bitter thoughts—they were manifold, and with me at all times and seasons. Thoughts of what had been said concerning him by Mr. Mannington, his daughter, and Mrs. Kingsworth —above all, by his own brother, who had offered me advice, too cruel and mysterious for my ignorance to profit by. Still, amidst this, the hope not utterly set aside—the belief that he would explain everything, and render my heart light again, flickering before me in the mist wherewith it had

pleased him to enshroud his actions. And above all and before all, the remembrance of that Sunday night when he asked me if I loved him, and I knew that he was true and in earnest!

We spent our Christmas month at the Hall, in the old fashion; everyone dropped into place, and outwardly it was the old times back again. I do not know that we were duller than we had been before the Edinburgh expedition; I was not so happy in myself as on the first occasion I spent Christmas with them; but I was happier than if they had all kept away from me. My excitability preyed upon me in a large lone house now all my housekeeping habits, my *statu quo*, had vanished for ever; I had become a different woman.

Bel Mannington alluded no more to her "fancies;" she had met with little sympathy, and she held aloof from any further confession. Ostensibly she was the same Bel Mannington; her spirits were variable, and her manner as eccentric as ever; she was not unhappy, for she had sketched her story in her mind, and perhaps she had more hope than I, for hers was a nature far more sanguine whilst the hope lasted.

Besides, there was the country maiden's great pleasure to look forward to—a county ball. All the talk about dress to sustain her, the selection, the fashion, the trimmings, the head-dress to match, and the ornaments wherewith to adorn it. She and her aunt held many conferences together concerning it, seeking my advice at times, and snubbing Mr. Mannington for his when unsolicited.

It had suggested itself to me that an invitation to accompany her from one of the family might have been made with good grace—I was Isabel's companion, guardian, Mrs. Kingsworth said—and that I might have been included in the party. Was Mr. Mannington at the bottom of this also? I had heard it was due to his influence that I was left so long at the Hall, and I was not without the suspicion—how suspicious I had grown of everybody! —that he had not wished to escort me as well as his daughter. No matter, I should see Mark Stewart before or after the ball; and for the truth, the whole truth, I had not long to wait now.

Does the reader wonder why I waited so long?

why I did not write another letter, in a fairer spirit than my last, to him whom I distrusted? Well, I was no heroine—I could not judge at that time right from wrong—the evil that lies in us all was uppermost, and I was sullen, jealous and discontented. I would write no more—I had made up my mind, or my pride had made it up for me, and I held fast to the one idea, that my silence was the better plan. There was a dreamy hope—God knows how I built upon it day by day—that he would write to *me*, express some anxiety at my long silence, ask me for an explanation, or hint to his brother to that effect; but the days stole on without a line from him, and Richard Stewart had shunned me more pertinaciously than ever after my rejection of his advice.

The ball day came at last—the fourth of January—to which many fair ones scattered within reasonable distance of Woundell had looked forward to so long. To steady-going country families this was the one great event of the year—the one excitement to counterbalance three hundred and sixty-four days of vegetation. It was an assembly of pretension, requiring great influence to secure a

voucher—the stewards were of the first water, and people of no "position" were not admitted on any pretence whatever.

Position!—what a grand thing it is after all—how serenely it carries one over the surface of things!—with that colour flying from the mast, one can skim lightly to greatness in a cockle-shell boat.

The day of the ball came at length, then, and with it no Mark Stewart. In the morning Richard Stewart appeared to transact his usual business with Mrs. Kingsworth, to discuss, in the first place, the sale of a large quantity of timber that had been hewn down in the plantation, and about the park-land, during the process of "thinning out;" and in the second, to take into consideration an offer for the purchase of some house-property held by Mrs. Kingsworth in the very town of Woundell, where the ball had been held in the January month of each year from ages remote.

I had evaded these business meetings lately—this day I had sought it, and met Richard Stewart on his own battle-ground. He looked towards me as I took my place at the window, and muttered a

gruff indistinct response to my "good day." I sat there, nervous and irritable, listening to the never-ending tune of money, which these two indulged in when they met—an incessant refrain, that was extra wearisome that morning.

Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Stewart debated both matters with some eagerness, growing somewhat quarrelsome over their facts and figures, in the usual fashion—Richard Stewart holding fast to his opinion, and Mrs. Kingsworth eventually giving way, after a few personalities conveyed under cover of business. Timber—lease of houses—money; money—lease of houses—timber, were bandied from one to the other, until the price was settled which Mrs. Kingsworth required.

Then Richard Stewart rose to go, and I went out of the room and waited for him in the hall.

"Your brother Mark is coming to Wilthorpe to-night?" I said when he came towards me.

"No—to-morrow morning."

"No matter, he will be at Woundell ball to-night—he has promised Miss Mannington."

"If he has promised anything he will keep his word, but——"

"How long does he stay at Wilthorpe?"

"Only a few hours, I believe, he will proceed thence to London."

"I ask you not to let him leave here until I have seen him—you who are still my friend?" I asked half doubtfully.

"Always your friend—Miss Casey."

He had hesitated whether to call me by my Christian name or not, and decided at last on the more formal appellative. I took it as a bad sign.

I went away in search of Isabel Mannington, and found her surrounded by lace, maize tulle, and flowers, in the centre of a whole army of dressmakers, who had arrived to try on, make alterations, and finish off—in fact, to be worried a very fair distance towards their graves by the heiress.

Bel Mannington, anxious to look her best, and excited about the result, brightened up at my appearance.

"Oh! I am so glad you have come, Bertie," she

said; "where *have* you been all this morning? Do look here—see what a fit these people have made me," she added, with very little regard for the feelings of the young ladies present on the occasion; "I've no patience with them!"

"I'm sure, miss, when it's all arranged, it will meet with your satisfaction," said the chief dressmaker, a tall spinster, with a hooked nose, and a hatchet aspect altogether; "the Honourable Miss Dudgeon has one exactly like it, and she expressed herself——"

"What!" screamed Bel Mannington, "you've dressed that ugly Dudgeon woman—that Life Guardswoman—like me! How dare you suggest anything that I am going to wear to her, or allow her to copy it?"

"I don't mean, Miss Mannington, that the material is exactly the same, or that the style——"

"Shall I tear it up?" and Bell glanced from me to the mantua-maker, with her dark eyes flashing fire, and her hands clutching convulsively the gossamer material. The milliner gave a little scream; and one pale-faced assistant, who had worked herself to death's door over it, cried, "Oh!

don't!" with the agony of a parent for its offspring.

"You'll have to take refuge in your blue silk then, Bel," I suggested.

"And I always look so odious in blue," she cried, her hands relaxing their tenacious grip; "we must go on with these rags. But the next time you dress me for Woundell ball, Miss Naston," looking daggers at the milliner, "remember it occurs on the fourth of January, or thereabouts, and not on *the fifth of November!*"

This was the family tartness uppermost, and I thought of Mrs. Kingsworth on the instant. Before I quitted the room, I left matters more peaceably progressing, and even received the thanks of the impatient heiress for the suggestions I had made. These thanks were at the expense of the poor milliners, so I made all haste to escape them.

"People who run in one groove are all for form, and have not an idea that is original in their composition—you, Bertie, untrained to the business, have at least rendered me presentable."

Passing Mr. Mannington's room, I found the little gentleman fidgeting in a similar fashion, as

though the success of the ball depended on his personal appearance. Through the open door I saw his dress-coat hanging before the fire, to get the creases out, and Mr. Mannington standing close to the window, inspecting his varnished boots, which he held one in each hand to the light.

"Ah! Miss Casey," he said, catching sight of me before I could pass, "making preparations for conquest, you see—he! he! How is Bel progressing?"

"Satisfactorily, I think, sir."

I joined Mrs. Kingsworth, whom I found in the garden, cold and frosty as the day was. I was glad of any escape into the fresh air—my head was aching terribly that day.

"Where's Bel?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"With the dressmakers, madam."

"Ah! then she is very bad company. You are politic to escape her. Let us have a turn round the garden, whilst the time is left us. We shall have snow when the sun goes down."

"I see no sign of it."

"Old women like me grow wondrous weather-wise, Miss Casey. You will find that I am right."

She passed her arm through mine, and walked on, tapping the ground lightly with her stick.

"The horses will be turned out to-night at the risk of their lives, to please the vanity of a girl, and a silly sexagenarian, and there will be no end of trouble to-morrow for servants of all degrees. I was never fond of dancing myself—they who brought me up had a soul above frivolities!"

She looked at me askance, and then said—

"You dance?"

"A little, madam."

"A strange freak of your mother's to add *that* to your accomplishments," said Mrs. Kingsworth. "When did you ever expect to exercise your saltatory abilities?"

"It is difficult to say."

"Would you have liked to attend this ball?"

"Yes."

"You, whom I thought so suitable as guardian to Bel, staid beyond your years, strong-minded, and to all appearances far above the women of your age —why, you have changed!"

"Greatly, madam—greatly!" I answered, with an inexpressible sigh.

"Ah! the world changes—so we change upon it," she said. "I am not surprised—*I am never surprised!* I suppose it is the old story of evil example, and all this bustle of preparation has turned your head a little?"

"I should have been glad to accompany her," I said thoughtfully.

"And you are Bel's guardian, legally. How far can you and I trust that nervous and irritable dandy? Give him a bag of money in trust," she said between her closed lips, "and he would not lose sight of it for an instant—but his daughter?"

"Surely he——"

"I had forgotten," she corrected, "his daughter is money to him, and will be cared for. You look shocked at my unsisterly criticism, Miss Casey, but I always speak my mind. I do not love my younger brother with all my heart and soul; when we were children I hated him for his unchildlike ways—and now I am not full of admiration for him. When I read a person like a book, and know that his every thought is for my money, and every kindness to me a forced profession, estimated at its money's worth, I am not inclined to sing his virtues very

loudly. You may tell him my opinion, if you will."

"No, madam."

"He would tell you, in return, that he is aware of it himself."

She changed the conversation, and shortly afterwards returned to the house. The day trailed its way on sluggishly—what a long day it seemed to me! After dinner Mr. Mannington and his daughter retired, Miss Mannington looking wistfully towards me as she went out at the door.

"She is afraid of taking away her aunt's sole companion," said Mrs. Kingsworth, "and anxious for your superintendence. Go to her, Miss Casey."

Whether I objected or not, I could scarcely tell. But I obeyed my mistress's behest.

I found Emma Eaves and another maid attendant upon her; Bel before the looking-glass, and all the paraphernalia of finery spread about the room. Bel in difficulties was always Bel excitable and out of temper. There were two crimson spots upon her cheeks, that might have been burned there with an iron.

Emma Eaves, excited also by her young mistress's little persecutions, might have stood for her sister at that moment; she appeared so flushed and angry.

"I shall never look well, Miss Casey," said Bel, half inclined to cry. "I'm sick of that disgusting brimstone dress, before I have put it on my back. Emma, you tiresome girl, why don't you stand still for a moment?"

"How can I, miss, with you ordering me about so much?"

"I'll order you out of the room, if you're pert," said Isabel. Then turning to me. "Miss Casey, are you going to stay here?"

"If you wish it."

"There's a dear good girl! I shall love you for ever afterwards. When I'm in trouble I'll run up a signal of distress. Meanwhile, look at the set of topazes my aunt has lent me."

Isabel Mannington prattled the greater part of the time her handmaids were preparing her for the ball; when matters were progressing fairly, her spirits rose high, though her nervous system was evidently a trifle deranged.

The time-piece ticking on her mantel-shelf struck eight before she was ready. The carriage had been ordered for seven, and countermanded twice.

"It's a ride of an hour and a half," she said; "and I wished very much to be early."

"Half-past nine will not be late."

"Country folk muster sooner than London, and break up earlier. *Now*, how do I look?"

I had put on her jewelry, arranged the wreath about her head, given the finishing touches to her general appearance. She was a girl who did justice to "dressing"—who never looked better than when great pains had been bestowed upon her. Some people never look worse.

I thought that she was very pretty that night; the delicate maize colour of her fleecy dress consorted with her slight figure and dark skin, whilst the lustrous eyes and flushed cheeks added an animation to a face that was at any time far from unattractive. Every movement of Bel Mannington was grace, and as she shook out her ample skirts, and swam to and fro before us, the old thought came upon me that she was a dangerous rival, of whom I should beware.

"Like a fairy—just like a fairy in a pantomime!" ejaculated Emma.

It was intended for a compliment, and Isabel was pleased with it. Admiration had its charms for Mr. Mannington's daughter.

"*You* don't say much, Bertie?"

"I can say that the dress is very becoming, and that to my eyes you never looked so well."

"Thank you—thank you, Bertie. It struck me that I was not looking my very worst to-night. And you who never flatter, too—how kind you are to say so! Bertie," in a low whisper, "is it so very impossible?"

"What—so very impossible?" I answered, that new feeling of aversion to her creeping over me.

"That he should take a fancy to me?"

"No—not impossible."

"Will he keep his word and come to-night?"

"*I hope so!*" I gasped forth.

"You do?—oh! if he come, I shall think that there *is* a chance for poor little me!"

"Hush—hush! This is *not* right! Keep your heart whole, Bel—just for a few days longer, when I will tell you something!"

"About him?"

"Yes—let us go downstairs now to your aunt."

We went downstairs to the drawing-room, and Isabel submitted herself to her aunt's critical inspection.

The old lady put on her spectacles, and gazed intently through them at her niece. I could see her features soften, the hard lines about the mouth relax; she was gratified at Isabel's appearance, and even the love she had for her showed forth despite her stoicism.

"You will do—for a Mannington," she said; "don't get in the draughts this wintry night, and don't believe, at seventeen years of age, all the nonsense with which every addle-pated booby considers it etiquette to amuse you."

"Is it likely, aunt?"

"Very," was the dry answer. "Where's your father?"

"If you please, ma'am," said a servant entering, "Mr. Mannington says he is nearly ready now."

"I will wait till I see that gentleman before I order the carriage to the door. Where are the horses?"

"In the covered stable yard, madam."

"Then—we'll wait."

Mr. Mannington shortly afterwards made his appearance. He had gone to dress at the same time as his daughter, but his valet had been longer over him. He came down at last, and burst into conversation with his daughter, carefully evading Mrs. Kingsworth's eye.

"You're sure that you are quite ready, Walter?" asked his sister.

"Oh! yes, yes—quite ready, thank you."

"Then the carriage can come round to the front door. You are looking as well as one can expect for your age, Mr. Mannington."

"Ahem!—are you ready, Isabel?"

"And it affords me no small gratification to perceive that your dancing days are not yet over. We come of a stock that lasts long, but if you brave late hours, cold nights, and these amusements, I shall see the end of you, depend upon it."

"God bless me! what a nice thought to start to a ball with!" said Mr. Mannington, turning as white as his tie; "really, Charlotte, I wish you wouldn't. I'm not looking ill, am I?"

"Miss Casey should have taken your place."

"Two young women could not have proceeded to a ball—impossible!"

"Society at Woundell would have excused the etiquette for the sake of the agreeable change."

"He! he!—not so bad. But Miss Casey is not fond of balls."

"On the contrary," said Mrs. Kingsworth, answering for me, "she has expressed a regret at being overlooked."

"Bertie!" cried Isabel, turning suddenly towards me; "oh! I did not think of it. I did not fancy for an instant that you——"

"Pray, do not apologize," I hastened to exclaim; "I have had no thought of the ball for itself—Mrs. Kingsworth has mistaken me."

"I'm sure, if I had only known it," said Mr. Mannington politely, "I should have been but too happy to escort Miss Casey also."

"The carriage waits, sir," was the announcement.

Adieux were exchanged, and Mr. Mannington bore his daughter away. When we were alone together, Mrs. Kingsworth walked across the room,

unlocked a little ivory casket on a table between the windows, and returned with a large white ticket in her hands.

"What is this?" I asked as she tendered it towards me.

"Your ticket for the ball—I procured it with my niece's, but Mr. Mannington objected. He must have his way sometimes."

"Why do you show me this now?"

"In the first place, because you may explain why you are not a favourite of Mr. Mannington's."

"I cannot explain that."

"In the second, because it is as well to know your enemies. I have always found it profitable in life."

"No enemy of mine, I am sure," I answered, "I have done him no harm."

"And in the third, because you must make use of that ticket and go to the ball!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOUNDELL BALL.

I LOOKED at the ticket, then at Mrs. Kingsworth, in bewilderment. Eccentric as she had ever proved herself, this was a surprise.

"I do not understand," I said at last.

"You wish for change," she replied; "for some reason or other, which it is not my place to attempt to discover, this particular ball has an attraction for you. Do you deny it?"

"No, madam."

"This is the first wish that you have ever expressed here, and we must study your whims and caprices as well as other people's, whilst you remain one of the family. *They* must not have it all their own way, or we shall find ourselves thrust from the foremost rank, by-and-by."

"But——"

"There, it is all settled. Go and dress, and be quick about it. You are not anxious for the ball alone—I can see that—therefore any evening dress will suit you."

"Do you expect me to go alone, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"You will go with me—I shall be your *chaperon* —OUR carriage is ordered for nine o'clock."

She could not repress a smile at my further astonishment. And how the smile changed her, to be sure! It was the first time in my life that I had seen her look like that—kind, gentle, motherly—just as she whom I had lost at sixteen years of age would have looked at me had she lived. I could have flown towards her and kissed her—nestled in her arms then and sobbed my sorrows forth. I knew then—if I had not guessed it before by intuition—that there was much real goodness in her, and that want of love and sympathy, added to past troubles, which had aged and hardened her, had been the ruin of a disposition naturally generous. The tears were in my eyes as I replied,

"No, madam, I cannot accept the sacrifice of

your comfort for my pleasure. I do not care about the ball now—I would rather sit here by your side and talk to you."

"A good young woman this," she said, laying her withered hand upon my hair; "I prayed God for such a daughter once."

She bent away her head from me and stood for a moment very still and motionless; then the old face, hard, angular and stern, was turned towards my own.

"*I* wish this too—I am in the mood for company to-night—I would show all the good folk at Woundell that it is not time yet to count upon my funeral. Get ready, Miss Casey."

"You have no ticket," I suggested.

"It does not matter—they will not stop me."

I went to my room with a fluttering heart and dizzy brain. Was I sorry?—was I glad? Could I account in any way for this new eccentricity on the part of my mistress?—was it possible that she had guessed the truth? No—she did not know of my engagement, and it was the mere desire to gratify a wish that she had seen was an intense one, that led her to take part with me. Well, from

that night forth I loved her better still—I took her closer to my heart, and felt myself her faithful handmaiden, ready to side with her against the world, if it ever turned against her.

I dressed hastily and nervously. If it were decreed that I should go to the ball, let me reach there in good time, and judge for myself—if it were possible to comprehend—the real meaning of Mr. Stewart's intentions! Would Mark be all that I wished, or all that I feared?—would he come at all?

I dressed myself in my last new silk—a blue glacé, that I had considered a little too bright for my taste, but had been talked into by a persuasive shopkeeper at Peterborough, whither I had been driven a few months back, less for my own convenience, perhaps, than for the sake of exercising the horses. And I had remembered that Mark Stewart's favourite colour for ladies was blue—I had worn blue at Sir Benjamin Prouf's dinner-party, and he had liked me first of all there.

I wore no ornament or flower in my hair. My last action was to place the diamond hoop upon my finger, and then I joined Mrs. Kings-

worth, who was already before me in the drawing room.

Mrs. Kingsworth, in a high black velvet dress and scarlet cloak, sat waiting for me. She looked at her watch as I entered.

"Five minutes before time—I am obliged, Miss Casey. I have been hunting over my case for something for your hair, but we had better leave the well alone. People would have said at Woundell that you were only flaunting in Mrs. Kingsworth's jewels. You can have flowers from the greenhouse, if they be worth waiting for."

"No, thank you, madam."

"Then we will start at once. Don't put your gloves on yet—we have a long ride before us. You are pale—is there anything to distract your nervous system *en avance*?"

"I hope not, madam."

"If so, never show it to the enemy, or the advantage is on his side—I have always found it so. Let me feel your pulse."

She placed her hand upon my wrist and looked down. The glitter of my ring arrested her attention, as it had done Mr. Mannington's. She did

not question me concerning it, however; she released my hand and said,

"We shall have time to compose ourselves. After all, this is not a very eccentric freak on a ball night. They must not set us down for mad people in our old age," she added, half absently, "that would be getting the game into their own hands in a new fashion."

The carriage was announced, and we went from the drawing-room through the hall to the porch.

It was snowing fast, and I remembered Mrs. Kingsworth's prophecy of the morning. It was a wild winter's night to drive nine miles in search of pleasure. We drew our cloaks more closely round us as we descended the steps and entered a small brougham, that was seldom used by the family.

We rattled along the dark drive into the country road. I found the snow-flakes had settled too thickly on the window-glass to see Richard Stewart's cottage very distinctly.

Mrs. Kingsworth noticed my glance in that direction, and said,

"He has not gone to the ball, I suppose?"

"I should think not."

"These Stewarts get into strange places when they make up their minds, but I fancy Woundell stands still too much upon its dignity to grant tickets to land-bailiffs. Yet his brother will be there—you know that?"

"Isabel thought he would."

"Isabel thinks too much of him—at present."

The old suspicion! I curled myself into the corner of the carriage and did not respond to this. I had not become used to the coupling of their names together yet awhile. She hinted indirectly at the future—but I would not make one effort more to raise the curtain. She might wish—she might have schemed to bring Mr. Stewart and her niece together. Before she went to Edinburgh she had spoken of one man as only fit for Isabel's husband, and I had been suspicious then of whom she meant.

We said no more to each other the rest of the way to Woundell. My companion, sitting by my side—there were no seats facing us—dropped off to sleep, I think, or into a deeper current of thought,

belonging to a time anterior to mine. Once she moved restlessly and murmured forth, as if in extenuation of a charge made against her by some dream-figure—

"It was for the best, I tell you!"

A long, cold, and depressing ride, with the snow falling more thickly on the carriage windows, and the lamp in the roof burning very dimly.

We reached Woundell at last—a large market town, that had always a fair degree of life in it, and where trade thrived, and men, contented with fair profits, saved money in good time. Ambitious people left discontented with its jog-trot way of doing business, and made fortunes or came to grief in the crowd which encountered them in larger towns, and fought harder for the prizes. But Woundell held a high place in the county, and had a court of justice in its midst, a county court, a police station, a gaol, a town-hall, a market, a pump with two spouts, and a monument to George III., "erected by the grateful inhabitants of Woundell," the adjective in which sentence had been neatly altered to "graceful," by some wag without either reverence or loyalty.

There was not much air of business about the town that night as we drove through its deserted streets. It was not until we approached the Town-Hall that the hum of several voices assured us that there were loiterers about still, hanging round the entrance doors, and interested in the "arrivals."

"Here's another!" a voice shouted; "don't go yet, Jo;" and Jo, who had grown tired of waiting, and become disgusted with the snow, probably returned to see what *we* were like! There was a shuffling of feet upon the pavement, and an authoritative voice—belonging to one policeman out of six who did duty at Woundell—requesting people to stand back; then the carriage-door was opened, and the entrance doors, the awning across the pavement, the waifs and strays of the town, the gleam of light before us, and a waste of snow and darkness on each side, were things to be seen and afterwards remembered.

We passed from the carriage to the entrance, and went up a flight of steps towards the ball-room, whence the faint strains of music reached us as we advanced.

"Half-past ten," said Mrs. Kingsworth to me; "quite ball-room hours."

On the top of the stairs, two smirking young men, hired for the occasion from the undertaker's round the corner, met us with extended hands for tickets.

Mrs. Kingsworth put them aside with the end of her stick, poking at the white waistcoat of the more obtrusive.

"Tickets, please, ma'am," said one.

"Here is my friend's—I have no ticket," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "don't stand in the way in that ridiculous position, please—we are in a draught here."

"But, madam—you really can't, madam—Sir Benjamin's orders were, madam——"

"Tell Sir Benjamin that his orders are not of the slightest consequence. I am Mrs. Kingsworth, and if he objects to my appearance, there's a police-man in attendance, and he can lock me up. Stand aside, menials!"

They gave way—one disappeared altogether for further orders, but before they were issued we were in the ball-room.

A bright scene enough, and one that did credit to the county. The warm room; the lights pendent from the ceiling; the decorations that had been extemporized for the occasion, and were graceful and appropriate; the music from the raised orchestra at the end of the room, where George III. smiled again in oil colours; the crowd of guests, well-dressed, well-bred, spinning round the room, all constituted a county ball of the first magnitude.

It was the first ball-room into which I had ever set foot, and its novelty impressed me. I saw nothing to sneer at or to satirize, although the first words I heard were from a dandy simpering at the door, "These country hops are always deuced slow, Frank!" And Frank, another dandy, looked at the ceiling, and said, "Ya—as."

They were waltzing when we entered, and those who could not waltz, and those who objected thereto, occupied so many of the side-seats, that we had some difficulty in finding a place from which to watch the dancers. I felt giddy and "dazed" by the change from the

shadowy carriage to the vortex of pleasure into which we had plunged.

I was glad to find a seat, and muster courage to look round me. *Courage* to look around me at that time and in that place! No, he was *not* there; he had not come yet. He was not amongst the knot of idlers at the door by which we had entered, or by the door facing it, which probably led into some refreshment room; he was not sitting on the cushioned seats ranged round the room, and if he had been waltzing I should have seen his head and shoulders above the rest of them. I was in good time to see the curtain rise upon the play!

Mr. Mannington and daughter were both indulging in the "round dance;" Mrs. Kingsworth's warning had had no effect on her brother, for there he was, spinning round and round with a rapidity and precision that did credit to his sixty years, and told of considerable practice. His partner was a lady in maize-coloured tulle—the identical and honourable Miss Dudgeon whom Bel had so uncourteously apostrophized in the morning of that day. A few couples distant from him

revolved Miss Mannington and the eldest son of Sir Benjamin Prout, at whose house I had dined some time ago. Father and daughter spun by with their respective partners, oblivious of our presence, and Mrs. Kingsworth put on her spectacles to watch the scene more closely.

"I hope the shock of seeing us will not be too much for Mr. Mannington," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "here he comes again!"

Mr. Mannington and the Honourable Miss Dudgeon were close upon us, Mr. Mannington slightly fatigued, and leaning his chin on his partner's shoulder for support, in a familiar, fatherly way. He came towards us somewhat wearily, Miss Dudgeon having danced him out of time a little; I could see his thin legs moving with some effort as he spun round and round towards us. Facing us at last with the next revolution, his half-closed eyes blinked suddenly, and then were opened to their fullest extent, as though he had seen a ghost.

"Lord save us!" he ejaculated; and as Miss Dudgeon whirled him away, I could see with every turn his eyes becoming larger and larger, as they

were fixed in our direction. Miss Mannington, absorbed in her waltzing, passed on oblivious ever more.

The waltz was not quite over, when Mr. Mannington, having landed the Honourable Miss Dudgeon by the side of her mamma, came towards us red and flurried, with a white handkerchief in his hand rolled into the semblance of a snow-ball.

"What—what—what's the matter, Charlotte?" he exclaimed; "and Miss Casey, too!—how very an—imating, to be sure!"

"If anything were the matter do you think I should be sitting calmly here?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"N—no, certainly not," he muttered, dabbing his forehead with the snowball; "but it's rather remarkable. Don't it strike you as just a little remarkable?"

"Not at all."

"Very well, Charlotte—you are the best judge, of course. I'm very glad to see you here, and to feel that you have the strength and energy to come. Shall I take you into the refreshment room?"

"You may take Miss Casey, if you will. She's not well, and I thought the change would do her good. Instead of which, it has robbed all the colour from her cheeks."

"Miss Casey—if you will favour me?"

Mr. Mannington offered his arm, and though loth to move for a while, I rose and accompanied him, keeping to the line of seats, and steering cautiously for the refreshment room.

"What made you come?" he asked me as we proceeded; "what ever made you come in this mysterious manner?"

"Mrs. Kingsworth wished it."

"Had you no idea this morning that you were coming to-night?"

"Not any idea at all."

"Dear me!—mad as a hatter!—bless my soul! what an odd freak!"

Through the curtained doorway to the refreshment room I was conducted by Mr. Mannington; the waltz had ceased then, and the tired and heated couples were coming in one stream after us.

Mr. Mannington hastened to procure me some wine; the excitement of the adventure had been

too much for me, and I was feeling faint and ill. The horror of making a scene in that crowded refreshment room was besetting me also, and I was anxious to drink my wine, and to escape the mob of ice-hunters.

"Stop a minute, Miss Casey—I was going to ask——"

But I pushed my way through the crowd, not without some recognitions, to which I paid no heed, and entered the ball-room, where a few were left promenading. Crossing the ball-room, a young lady sprang upon me, and looked me full in the face—Isabel Mannington.

"It is you, then!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad, I'm so astonished! But how did you get here, and who brought you?"

I replied to the last question only.

"Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Aunt!" ejaculated Miss Mannington, "*here!*" and her voice reached the alto pitch of amazement. "What for—?"

"Miss Mannington," said a voice behind us at this juncture, and a lank, pasty-faced youth suddenly merged upon the scene, "you will allow me

to remind you that I have been favoured with the promise of your hand for the next dance."

"Oh! bother!"

And away Miss Mannington tore me in the direction of her aunt, leaving her promised partner with his lower jaw on his chest.

Miss Mannington, once by the side of her aunt, and reconciled to the appearance of her and me at the Woundell ball, became full of information in her turn. She was spending a very pleasant evening—there were plenty of Wilthorpe people there—she was engaged for almost every dance, except the quadrilles, she added in a lower tone to me.

"He's not come yet—but he'll not break his word," she whispered.

"You are looking better, Miss Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "your colour is all coming back again."

Well it might come! Still I was better; I was growing accustomed to the scene; I was anxious to see the story of this night to the end; less faint and more stern; less hopeful and more assured that ever after that night a new life, and

new thoughts connected therewith, would fall to my lot.

Yes, I was sure *he* would come too, and that he would not break his word.

The dance began again : the pasty-faced youth, who had fallen desperately in love with Miss Mannington early in the evening, and had been following her with his eyes through all the dances, and been jealous of each of her partners in succession, again asserted his claim, and this time bore her off. Sir Benjamin Prout suddenly rose up before us.

"Very pleased to see you here this evening, Mrs. Kingsworth and Miss Casey," he said, shaking hands with us. "I have been searching for the bold innovator of our rules."

"I owe you a guinea, Sir Benjamin—I shall not forget it."

The baronet coloured.

"I will refer you to the committee," he said with a forced laugh; "meanwhile, would you like to visit the card room?"

"I think of staying here if you will allow me," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "I am waiting for a friend who has not arrived yet."

"So late as this!"

"Yes."

"My friend Mr. Stewart, perhaps? He is a man of business and will not neglect profit for pleasure. Miss Casey," turning to me, "I have a young friend who has pressed me very hard for an introduction to you. May I beg yonr assent to the same?"

"Please, no," I ejaculated, "I do not wish to dance to-night. I have——"

"Miss Casey must not sit by the side of an old scarecrow all the evening," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "bring forth the Adonis, if you please, Sir Benjamin. I admire the young man's perceptive powers, and think that he is deserving of Miss Casey for a partner."

Sir Benjamin departed.

"Oh! Mrs. Kingsworth," I exclaimed, "I have no wish to dance."

"Enjoy yourself whilst you are pretty and young, Miss Casey," she said, "time enough for sitting still and seeing others play the game of life out when you are married, or as old as I am. Strange events evolve from gay meetings of this

character; a woman may meet her fate here, find her future husband or her future tyrant, date from to-night a life's happiness or misery. Neglect not a chance of finding a helpmate, Miss Casey."

"You advise me!"

"It is the fashion—no woman is in her proper sphere husbandless."

She spoke bitterly, and before I could reply Sir Benjamin advanced with his friend—a handsome rosy-faced man, with whiskers which he had evidently pinned his soul to—large "weepers," cultivated with care, and looked at fondly by their owner after every speech.

"Mr. Stalks—Miss Casey."

Mr. Stalks was anxious to engage me for the next dance, and looked at his left whisker—surprised that I had not a card, and looked at his right whisker, darted away in search of a steward, returned with my name inscribed on the vacant space under the next quadrille, bowed, smirked, looked at his whiskers again, and retired.

When the dance we were watching was over, Mr. Stalks appeared again, offered me his arm, and proceeded to promenade with me, discoursing

volubly on a variety of subjects, and glancing at his one great object of attraction in an inane hypochondriacal manner, that made me long to scream at him.

The next dance was a quadrille; ladies and gentlemen were already taking their places, we took ours with the rest and faced the entrance doors, which I had been watching at every opportunity allowed me, and which place I had suggested as convenient.

"Tewible dwaught!" Mr. Stalks affirmed; "blows one's hair about so, I find. Don't you observe a tewible dwaught, Miss Casey?"

"No," I answered, "I prefer this situation."

"Vewy well, then."

The quadrille began; glancing towards Mrs. Kingsworth, I saw that Miss Mannington had taken her place beside her—she had been disappointed in *her* partner.

The side couple on my left were glancing in the same direction, and talking scandal also. Oh! the scandal at the side scenes of society!

"Who *is* that girl in maize, William?" asked the lady.

"Mrs. Kingsworth's niece, just come out. Do you think her pretty?"

"Not at all," was the disparaging comment.

"Interesting, I think."

"Oh! of course you do," was the sharp answer; "you danced with her the very second dance."

All this dialogue between an irritable Corydon and Chloe impossible to escape from in a crowded ball-room, where the figures could just be struggled through—nearly everybody in the room having been seized with a desire to *do* the first set.

Passing and repassing, I could not shut my ears against the dialogue.

"She's the daughter of that old chap with the sharp nose," I heard him say again; "Mrs. Kingsworth was a Mannington."

"The Manningtons of Deeneby—what happened to them?—something."

"The old lady, Mrs. Kingsworth's mother, killed herself, I have heard my father say."

"Oh! a mad lot!"

A mad lot! Did this account for Mrs. Kingsworth's eccentricity, and the wildness of Bel Mannington, I thought, with a shudder I could not

resist. Mr. Stalks detected my spasmodic contraction of the shoulders.

"Told you there was a tewible dwaught from that doorway, Miss Casey," he said—"comes up the stairs somehow or other, and blows your hair about. Just look now how those curtains are shwaking to and fro, just as if—oh! that's somebody coming in, I see! Gwacious, who is he?"

MR. STEWART! He came through the curtained doorway and stopped—the tall and handsome man I had seen last in the country lane; my heart leaped towards him, and my old faintness for a moment seemed to dash upon me irresistibly. Then I recovered, and looked anxiously in his direction, but his gaze was travelling down the room in search of other faces more likely to be seen there than my own.

So we met again.

CHAPTER VIII.

BERTIE AT BAY.

I WATCHED him narrowly, forgot my position, my place in the quadrille—everything. There was nothing in the world but Mr. Stewart that I could think of then.

He was paler than his wont—a second glance assured me of this. He was older-looking, and more stern. The lips were more compressed, and the eyes were shadowed by dark rings beneath the lids. But he was a very handsome man, and he had not stood many minutes in the doorway before glances were directed towards him from all parts of the room. He was well-known, too—more than one whisper of his name circulated amongst the visitors. Could it be possible, I thought, that he

had ever asked me to become his wife, save in some dream, which had haunted me with its semblance of reality?

Our eyes met at last, and I noted a slight start, a sudden suffusion of colour to his face, and an elevation of his eyebrows; then his quick eyes wandered to my partner, whom he seemed to regard intently for a moment. He bowed to me very coldly, I thought, and then he moved away in the direction of my friends. An instant or two afterwards he was sitting by Miss Mannington's side, smiling for the first time at *her*.

The quadrille was a mockery, and I was glad when I had escaped it, declined further attention from my partner, and hurried at once, almost with undue haste, towards my strange lover. He was still sitting by Miss Mannington's side, entering his name on her engagement card as I came up with them.

"It is the first dance after supper," he said; "you will not leave very soon?"

"We shall all go home together in the Clarence," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "I have dismissed my own

carriage, and I am not disposed to stay too long here."

"You did not come together, then?" he asked.

"No—Miss Casey and I took it into our heads at the last moment. Here is Miss Casey."

He jumped quite nervously at my propinquity, rose, and shook hands with me, looking into my face very intently.

"I hope you are well," he said, in a deeper voice than usual.

"Quite well, sir, thank you."

"I had no idea that you would be here this evening."

"Nor I, until eight o'clock."

I took my seat by Mrs. Kingsworth's side, away from him; I was a weak woman, not adopting the best plan to show that I was hurt with him, or that I had been unhappy for many, many months. His eyes followed me to my seat, then he turned to Miss Mannington, and resumed his conversation with her. Mrs. Kingsworth addressed herself to me, and left them free to talk.

An animated dialogue, in which Bel Mannington

took the leading part, and evinced too readily her pleasure at seeing her companion, and her interest in all he said. Impulsive, childlike, and free from any attempt to mask her feelings, she lowered herself—at least, in my eyes—by her anxiety. It was soon over, for her partner arrived to claim her for the next dance—the last before supper—and she rose to keep her engagement with no very amiable looks.

Mr. Stewart moved closer to Mrs. Kingsworth, and spoke of Edinburgh and the friends whom his companion made inquiry concerning; these two, who had stood flashing their daggers' points at Sir Benjamin Prout's dinner-party, seemed now the best of friends. Mrs. Kingsworth more than once deferred to his opinion with a courtesy quite new to me. Had she learned to know at last the real value of this gentleman, or had it struck her that he might marry Bel Mannington, and it was better to enact a different part?

Mr. Mannington, who, to the affected surprise of his sister, was not indulging in the last galop, appeared upon the scene and shook hands with Mr. Stewart.

"Who's that dancing with Isabel?" he asked immediately afterwards.

"Young Roach of Newton—Squire Roach's son."

"I thought so—he'll take her into supper now—that was his artfulness, no doubt. I don't like young Roach—he said I was a skipjack once—and his father is over head and ears in mortgages."

"There is no occasion for alarm—do you escort me into supper, Walter?"

"Ahem—yes—with pleasure."

"I trust Mr. Mannington will waive his claim in my favour," said Mr. Stewart politely.

"No, thank you," said Mrs. Kingsworth quickly; "I will not weigh you down with the responsibility of being agreeable to an old woman. The young for the young, and the hideous," taking her brother's arm and rising, "for the hideous! I leave Miss Casey, an old friend, to your care till after supper. Let us see, Walter, if we can find our way to the supper-room, and get a good place before the dancers hustle us to death. You and I, with a foot each in the grave, care very little about the unsubstantialities."

"Just as you say—this way, Charlotte—you'll leave directly after supper, I suppose?"

"I have ordered the Clarence at two."

"The Clarence!"

"We all go home together—two of the horses I sent back at once."

"Bless me!"

When they were out of hearing, when the dancers were whirling madly past us, Mr. Stewart rose and offered me his arm.

"Will you come with me?" he said.

I nodded in assent, took his arm, and went with him through the maze of dancers to the refreshment-room—empty of visitors now, even of waiters, who had been marshalled off to the banquet. We sat down side by side there, to begin the tragedy after all this comedy. I had waited for this a long while—it had come at last, and now I feared it!

"You are looking ill, Bertie," he said in his old tones, but my heart took no pleasure from them; "have you been unwell?"

"No," I murmured.

"I am surprised to find you here to-night—I

was not aware that you were fond of public balls."

"I heard that you were coming—is that excuse enough for my presence here? I heard that you had engaged yourself to dance with Miss Manning-ton, and I was curious to see if you would keep your word."

"I never break it."

He was silent for a while. A waiter came into the room, secured a handful of spoons, glanced at us in a friendly way, and then passed out at a back door. When we were alone again, he said quietly, almost mockingly:

"You are jealous."

"I am unhappy," I answered quickly; "I have been treated like a child—and then reproved like one. You have stung me by your bitter words—and then by your more bitter silence, caring nothing for me, and thinking nothing of me, but going your own way in life, as though I existed not, or had no claim upon your consideration. Better to have honestly said at once that you were tired of me, and had repented of your folly, than have acted in this unmanly fashion."

He listened to me, watching every expression of

my face, flushed and agitated; he struggled hard to maintain that demeanour which had carried him in life so well—but his face had become pale, and one white-gloved hand opened and closed absently upon his knee. I felt in the midst of my passion—for it was the long pent-up torrent of indignities leaping its bounds at last—that I was not acting for the best, or showing myself in the best light to him, and yet I went on to the end.

"I have been unhappy too—you make no consideration for that—and," he added very sharply, "I ask none. I am strong enough to bear my own troubles, and the sympathy of a woman with them would but add to the burden. Yet I came hither to explain them."

"Not here—you did not expect me here."

"I stand corrected—I was not speaking by the card," he answered; "here, I came to fulfil a silly promise; to-morrow, I should have been at Richard's house at Wilthorpe, to see you."

"And explain all?"

"And explain all."

"If it be simply that you are tired of me, it is easily explained, Mr. Stewart," I said.

"If I had only that to tell you, I should have said so long ago, Miss Casey," he replied more coldly; "it would not have been just or honourable on my part to have held *that* secret so tenaciously. You spoke of a letter that I sent you—you may remember, perhaps, that I asked therein for your confidence in me."

"You had it until——"

"Until it was lost," he added; "exactly so. Well, we stand on very different ground now, divided by a gulph that must widen between us more and more, now confidence is lost. Your fault, not mine."

"If you are anxious for an excuse, Mr. Stewart, take that, and let me go free and forget you!"

I sprang to my feet, but he held my hand and drew me back to a place by his side.

"Pardon me, but I would not part in anger with you—I would ask you for more patience, and—more justice."

"What more can I do?" I pleaded; "what more is there to say? If I have been jealous of you, the reason has not been wanting; if I have lost my confidence, it is because you have feared to trust me."

"You do not understand me—and I have been mistaken in you."

"We were both in error—I see it now—I know it now!" I cried; "you stooped from your position to raise me, and brought me only this humiliation."

The hot tears had risen to my eyes, but I dashed them away with an angry hand. He turned paler still, and looked down thoughtfully at the carpeted floor, with his own hands clasped together. Beyond the doorway by which we had entered spun the mad dancers, a glare of light and colour, a whirl of life and gaiety, with which every thought of ours was utterly at variance.

"My position stands apart from the question," he said; "pray spare me any taunts to render this reminiscence more cruel. What I came for—with what thoughts or hopes—with what intentions, selfish or unselfish, matters not now—I see all very clearly in the distance, and it is best for both of us."

"I have been expecting this excuse——"

"Pardon me," he said proudly, after a moment, even fiercely, "you do not understand me. Some day you will judge me better, or I have been

mistaken in you. You must not speak of my *excuses;* I have always been above offering them, and let those who loved me, or despised me, think their best or worst of me. To my own conscience I have remained pure, at least. All this," with an impatient toss of his hand, "scarcely worth dwelling upon, save that I would stand well in your estimation after we have parted."

I did not answer. I did not comprehend him. I knew alone that there was a secret, with which he would not trust me, and that after that night all would be ended between us!

"I am sorry that we have exchanged one harsh word, Miss Casey," he said mournfully; "that at least was unnecessary. We sit here now, a man and woman of the world, who have dropped all sentiment, and awakened to the consciousness of our unfitness for each other. Is that the position?"

"If you wish it—yes. If you have ever thought that it was best for us to part—yes, a thousand times!"

"I have thought so!" he added, in the same mournful tone that had awakened such strange yearnings in my heart towards him; "I, who have

prated of confidence in me, confess that. If for your sake more than my own, Bertie—forgive me, it is for the last time!—still the truth has asserted itself, and made me fearful of results. I have been a coward, perhaps—Dick thinks so—but to-night brings with it the sternest conviction of all, and withers every bud of promise with its frost. So much the better for you and me to part—is it not?"

"So much the better!"

My wounded pride said that rather than my heart, but he took it for my answer.

"Shall we say good-bye now, or play the farce out of idle companionship at the supper-table?"

"No—don't come—let me be alone," I cried.

"The better plan, perhaps, although people may talk, and Mrs. Kingsworth may observe that we are separated."

"Sir, I will have no mockery of appearances!"

"You are right—it is not worthy of you. Then good-bye."

He held his hand towards me, and I put mine within it, after a struggle to resist the impulse.

"You will think worse of me than this," he murmured; "this decision brings about strange

results, and makes me a more worldly man. Think the best of me that you can, and for all the past, God bless you !"

"Let me go now."

"You will meet with a better husband than ever I should have made—and I part here with the only woman who could have made me happy—and yet all is for the best, for me as well as you. Strange inconsistency of a life that breaks in mid-air like this! Good-bye."

He dropped my hand and walked rapidly away from me into the ball-room, where the dance was over, and the promenaders waiting for the supper-signal. I sat stunned, bewildered, conscious of nothing save that he and I had severed our engagement, and were never again to have one hope in common. If I could have flung myself upon that cushioned seat and given way to all the grief within me, I should have felt less crushed by the weight upon my brain.

But there was no place of rest for me yet; the musicians came talking and laughing into the refreshment room, and I gathered my cloak round me and went away shivering. I remember one

man hastening after me and presenting me with my fan, that I had left upon the seat; and I have a consciousness of passing with the stream of visitors across a stone landing-place to the supper-room, as a somnambulist might have done.

No one noticed my abstraction; no one spoke to me; I was alone with my thoughts, and I took my place companionless at the table with the rest, a white-faced phantom, that attracted no attention.

Everything connected with that supper I remember vaguely; that it was a spacious room, that there was a crowd of guests talking, laughing, and gesticulating, that the viands were costly, and the sparkling wines flowing freely, that every one seemed happy but myself, I knew that—nothing more. The waiter changed my plate at stolid intervals, taking away each untasted dainty—once my companion on my left looked at me, failed to recognize a friend, and turned her back—I remember her head-dress of turquoise so vividly, that a turquoise ornament brings back that ghastly supper to this day—but all was dream-land, and I was in a trance.

This banquet after my great sorrow seemed at the time harder to bear than my parting with him; I was but conscious of one thing, that I must not give way or act a scene in that place. Are there any unfortunates amongst my readers who have had such feelings as these, and have masked them before society that has shut tragedy out of doors for the nonce? They will understand me—few else. They will remember in their turn the dreamlike character of the reality, and the real agony of that which has passed away like a dream. They will think how hollow and vapid was the jest that "set the table in a roar," and how cruel and heartless everybody seemed on that night when the ship went down, with all hopes on board! Time may have healed the wound, and other hopes taken root and flowered since then, but the reminiscence is startling, and one shudders at it still.

I went out of the room with the rest of the ladies, Mrs. Kingsworth meeting me upon the stairs.

"Where is Mr. Stewart?" she asked.

"I have lost him!"

"I did not see him in the supper-room at all. Is he well? He was looking pale and lined."

"Well, madam, I believe."

"He has told you something of your brother that has distressed you," said she.

I seized at this loop-hole of escape, and answered evasively,

"He is tired of Edinburgh, I believe."

"I hinted so before this. It was to be expected —why grieve at it?"

When we were in the ball-room, when the gentlemen had returned and the band had got back to the raised orchestra, I looked piteously at Mrs. Kingsworth.

"I am so very tired!" I could not refrain from ejaculating.

"Realization and expectation seldom agree with each other," said she; "you are not more weary of this ball than I am. I wish we had not sent away the carriage."

"How far is it to Wilthorpe?"

I had some wild idea cross my mind of walking thither in my opera-cloak and satin slippers. I could not reason soberly that night.

"Nine miles. We shall get home faster than we came. Where is Bel? She must dance her quadrille with Mr. Stewart."

Mr. Stewart had already discovered her; he was dancing with her a short while afterwards; I turned my head away and would not watch them—I had no right to have suspicions now!

At the end of the quadrille, Mr. Stewart brought Bel Mannington, smiling and radiant, towards us.

"You are a man of your word, Mr. Stewart," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "is it this firm ratification of all engagements that has made you so successful in life?"

Mr. Stewart winced, as though he suspected some hidden meaning in her words, which on this occasion was not intended.

"It was a promise," he said, "performed awkwardly and ungracefully after all these months of expectation. I have to wish you a good evening."

"Going?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes."

"I regret more than ever that I sent back our

carriage, if you think of proceeding to Wilthorpe at once."

"I am going to London."

"To-night?"

"Yes, to-night. I have important business there, and have only broken my journey at Woundell to start again by the two o'clock mail train."

"How I envy you your energy."

"In the world of commerce one must fight hard or drop. Good evening."

He shook hands with each of us. Was it fancy? or did he hold my hand with a lingering touch that troubled me again? Ah! all fancy.

He went out of the ball-room at once, never looking back at us; Mrs. Kingsworth addressed her thoughtful niece.

"Bel, I am anxious to get home. Are you tired of the ball?"

"Yes, *now*."

"Content to give up all those partners who have inscribed their autographs upon this fancy card?"

"They're a pack of ninnies, with no sense in them," she said petulantly; "yes—let us get home."

"Your father is talking to Miss Dudgeon—you must beware of a mother-in-law in that direction, Isabel."

"Good heaven!" ejaculated her niece, "that woman!"

"Think of the eventual legacies, my child—not of a little personal discomfort. Miss Dudgeon has a fortune, I am told."

"Let her keep it. Oh! aunt, you are only in fun."

"I am always in fun when I talk of money, girl!"

We rose to leave the ball-room; passing Miss Dudgeon, Mrs. Kingsworth, playfully disposed, dropped the gold knob of her stick on the back of her brother's head.

"Oh! dear!—what's that?"

"We are going, Walter."

Walter swallowed all affronts from Mrs. Kingsworth. Before we were at the bottom of the grand

staircase, Mr. Mannington had joined us with his dress-coat collar turned up, and a shawl wound round his throat.

Through the last pair of heavy curtains, and the winter met us, searching and keen. Beyond the lighted lamps at the entry, stretched the black night, and athwart it the hurrying, flickering snow, was tossed confusedly by the wind.

"Mrs. Kingsworth's carriage."

Into the carriage one by one, and then away through the streets and into the country, lying still and cold in its wintry shroud. They fell asleep by degrees, and left me time to think. What a long, long wearisome journey, and oh! what a haven of rest in the distance seemed my own quiet room.

It was mine at last. I locked the door upon intruders, tore off my cloak and gloves, and, with his ring still upon my finger—his engagement ring!—I sank down and spread my hands before my face, and cried a little—not much—not enough to take the weight away!

Then I prayed that he might be happy without me—for ever happy in the new estate from which

he shook me off. That was not selfish at least, and I felt the better for it.

So the romance ended—and my old life began again.

END OF THE THIRD BOOK.

BOOK IV.

CHRONICLES THE FURTHER INTENTIONS OF MR. STEWART.

CHAPTER I.

ANOTHER MEETING.

IT is some satisfaction to record here, that I surmounted my disappointment pretty well. That my own self-love, self-importance, pride, or whatever it was—all three together, for what I know to the contrary—came to my rescue when the first bitterness of my sorrow was over.

I adopted the very uncommon course—more particularly in books, where the fair writer has to dilate upon her morbid sensations—of making the best of it. The objectionable truth had stepped into the foreground, and I had to face it, and put up with it. It was a skeleton at the feast, reminding me of the death of the fairest hope I had ever had; but I thought it down, and fought it down, coming out of the *mêlée* a little scarred, but none the

worse. Nay, all the better, for I was becoming vain and self-sufficient, and my head had turned just a little with the prospect of my future greatness. In the latter days—when Mr. Stewart's intentions had become very vague and misty—it had been a restless life with me; and now the worst was over, I could accept my lesson of resignation, and think that all *had* happened for the best.

All for the best! I should have been raised above my station, and set in a world to which I did not properly belong; I might have found afterwards, instead of before—God help those unfortunates who do!—that the lover's fancy had been a fugitive one, and the *mésalliance* a thing to be regretted. I had loved him very dearly; he had seemed all that was honourable and true to me, and it was not possible to forget him, even after the best of it had been made, and I considered myself the same contented, even old-fashioned woman—graver than my years warranted, certainly—that I had been in my housekeeping days at the Cork-cutters' Hall.

I kept my secret to myself, for my own sake now. There was nothing to acknowledge that could give

me pleasure, or which anyone living had a right to know. It was my own little sad romance, finished in one volume, and sealed up for ever!

But again let me say, it was not possible to forget him. I bore no malice in my heart against him; I believed that he had done his best to love me, and although I would have preferred less mystery about his reasons for resigning me, yet I was assured that there had been something of a struggle to break asunder the ties, or he was a better actor than I deemed him. I thought of him as a friend still; I believed that there would come a day when he would offer a clearer explanation of the motives which had separated us; I knew that he had been troubled like myself, and if he had fallen in love with Bel Mannington, why, I could forgive him, for Bel's sake as well as his own. He was no longer the hero of my day-dreams; he had not sacrificed position for my sake; the faults and failings of our poor humanity he was not exempt from—my love had raised him on too high a pedestal, and if he had descended to earth, he was still an honourable man, and had been kind to brother John.

Two months went by at Wilthorpe—it was near Lady-Day again, and John Kingsworth Casey still remained at Edinburgh. I received a letter from him a few days before the cheque was due.

"Keep the cheque till you hear from me again, dear Bertie," he had said—a request somewhat new for him, who was partial to cheques at once. Two months, and then Mr. Mark Stewart appeared once more in Wilthorpe. I met him one wintry afternoon in the drive, where he had told me that he had loved me, and the associations connected with that place struck us both as we came by chance face to face there.

London had not improved him, and the pale face, with its new anxious looks, was there still, I observed.

"Good morning, Miss Casey," he said, so abruptly, that he reminded me of his brother Richard at once; "I was coming to the Hall in search of you."

"In search of me, sir!" I repeated, with unfeigned surprise.

"Yes," he answered—"is it so remarkable?"

"Not very remarkable, perhaps," I answered;

"may I inquire the object of that visit with which you would have favoured me?"

I had collected my powers of composure now. It had been a shock to meet him there so suddenly, —though I had been thinking of him going down the drive,—and my cheeks had crimsoned and my step faltered very much. Now I was in my woman's armour—capable of disguising all emotion, and able to meet him on his own ground, cool and self-possessed. For men do not have it all their own way, or see always too clearly to the bottom of our hearts, whilst we hold command over our features, and keep our lips from faltering. There are some brave women amongst us yet who have fought their battles well, and held fast in the face of despair. Our pride saves us very often from humiliation, and turns the tide in our favour now and then. That self-command is a glorious attribute of our womanhood, for which we should be thankful, albeit it leads us into grave mistakes at times. It led me then, but I did not know it till long afterwards.

Mr. Stewart did not like my cool demeanour, he would have preferred to see me more embarrassed in his presence, betray more surely the evidence of

my remembrance of him. If I loved him then, he did not see it; I had thought that I had chased all love for him out of my heart, even in those early days, until he came, gaunt and haggard, on my path again. But he never saw through my disguise, although my part was over-acted, and he had been all his life a man of more than common observation.

His lips compressed somewhat at my last remark; then he turned and walked back towards the country-road with me, keeping step, and keeping, for a longer period than I could account, silence also.

"Miss Casey," he said at last, "my appearance here must seem to you an unwarrantable intrusion, after all that has separated you and me."

"I am sorry that we have met so soon," I answered; "such meetings must naturally be painful."

"Naturally—yes."

"And your courtesy might have spared me this meeting," I added with no little dignity.

"It might—possibly I have been in the wrong," he said hurriedly; "you will excuse me—it shall

not occur again. Miss Casey, it has struck me that neither you nor I need bear each other any great degree of ill-will?"

"And you came hither to tell me that?"

"Yes—partly," he added after a moment's consideration of his answer; "I would be your friend still—advance, if it be ever possible with me, your prospects in life?"

"I will ask you to leave my advancement to my own efforts, Mr. Stewart," I said; "I have a hope that I shall continue to make my way in the world, without being indebted to your kind consideration of me."

"Is that satire?"

"No, sir. And I will hope," I added more earnestly, "that you will not lose your interest in my brother John, to whom you have been more than kind."

"I will do my best, Miss Casey."

"By-and-bye, I will even hope that we shall be friends, when we chance to meet—that we shall be able in the future to laugh at the folly which for so short a period made us more than friends. It was a great folly—I see that now!"

"You are a singular woman," he replied; "I give up attempting to understand you. Most girls in your place would have avoided mooting a subject calculated to embarrass them."

"I am a plain woman, Mr. Stewart. And," drawing myself up to my full height, which was not very imposing after all, "I am not afraid of the truth."

"It was a folly, then," he said moodily, catching up the one word of my previous remark; "we will consider it so, and thus conclude that part of our argument. That being settled, *that* being considered a folly, let me ask you to dismiss it for ever from your thoughts—like a folly as it is!"

"Well, sir?"

"You scarcely understand me in my turn, Miss Casey," he said, "or I have not made myself sufficiently explicit. This folly, I will ask you to consider as a something not worthy of entertaining our friends with."

"Why?"

"Because you will be exposed to the sneers of a few, and the idle curiosity of many. Because it is not well for you or me that the folly which brought

us together, or which parted us, should be a matter for discussion amongst *these* people," he added, somewhat impetuously.

"I am not likely to make known my story here," I answered; "but I cannot think it your place, Mr. Stewart, to seek to exact a promise from me to that effect."

"I seek to exact nothing," he replied; "I was thinking of your own position here—you may believe to the contrary, if you will."

I did not answer. His irritable responses rendered him more than ever like his brother, though they set upon him in an uncharacteristic fashion.

"Miss Casey," he said suddenly, "I told you at the Woundell ball that you would learn to think very strangely of me. The time is fast approaching—you will try to think your best?"

"I will try," I murmured.

"Thank you."

He turned to retrace his steps down the drive. He was going to the Hall still; his meeting with me had not distracted him from that intention! Evidently this bad opinion which he feared would be entertained for him in the future, applied to his

visits to the Hall—his courtship of Bel Manning-ton. Well, that was no business of mine, and if he liked her—if he liked her!—why, let him marry her, and make her happy.

He was proceeding slowly down the drive, when I said quickly.

"Mr. Stewart."

He came back and stood before me, with his hands behind him, looking very thoughtfully into my face, whilst I struggled to withdraw the diamond ring from my hand which I had un-gloved.

"I have been wearing this every day, in the hope of seeing you—if I had not heard from your brother that you were in London, I should have sent it to Edinburgh—will you take it back, please?"

"If I might express one wish——"

"You may not, sir!" I cried angrily.

"Very well."

He took the ring from me, turned it over and over in his hand, seemed, even to my fertile imagi-nation, to be struggling with an impulse to fling it away from him over the high hedge. I left

him standing thus, and went on to the great gate at the end whereat two men were loitering. As I approached I recognized in one Mr. Richard Stewart, who was talking energetically to a gentleman whom I had not seen before in Wilthorpe.

"I'll give you three days, Mr. Stewart, and then beware of me. I have had enough of this fighting in the dark."

"In three days do your worst, if I fail to keep my word."

"You Stewarts are——"

"That will do. In three minutes I'll shake the life out of you, if you dare to say another word. Your place is to go now and keep quiet. I'm sick of you!"

And, in turning to give an angry shake at the gate against which he was leaning, Richard Stewart became aware of my approach. He started and opened the gate for me; the stranger moved away, and went at a leisurely pace down the road towards the village.

Richard Stewart laid his hand upon my arm as I gave him good morning, and looked into my face all eagerness.

"Well?" he said.

"Well," I rejoined, "what is the matter?"

"You have seen Mark?—he has been waiting all the day for you."

"Yes, I have seen him. How long does he stay here, are you aware?"

"I am not aware—exactly," he answered.

His voice changed to a low set tone, and he also went hastily up the drive, without another word. I went on to the village, passing in my way the stranger who had been conversing with Richard Stewart. He was a middle-aged man, with sharp eyes and great grey whiskers, dressed in deep mourning. He glanced furtively at me from under his hat as I passed him on the country road.

CHAPTER II.

EAVES-DROPPING.

IT was nightfall before I returned to the Hall. I had been visiting on a large scale amongst my dependents—humble friends whom I had left in arrear during the last two months. Summoning courage to begin my old hablts, I had met with a stern check at the outset; but I shook off all sad impressions and went through my business steadily. I had made up mind to begin afresh, and even my unlooked-for meeting with Mr. Stewart failed to turn me from my course.

I came back along the dark road between the village and the Hall, all the better for my entry into life again. The night was cold and bracing, and the frost-bound road sounded metallic under my feet. I had been gone four hours on my mis-

sion, and was wondering if the Hall folk would be surprised at the absence of one who had become so great a stay-at-home.

I had reached the gate of the Hall, and had turned almost instinctively to look towards the cottage of Richard Stewart, when a figure standing between me and the lighted window gave me my first surprise that night.

I stood by the gate considering the reasons that had set an eaves-dropper there, and that eaves-dropper, as I saw by the outline of dress against the light, a woman. What could take a woman there at that hour?—what motive, unallied to a purpose antagonistic to my good friend Richard Stewart, could have placed a listener in that position? Here was a new mystery, and I, who had grown tired of mysteries, resolved at least to end this one, and question the intruder.

I crossed the road, and passed through the open wicket of Mr. Stewart's fence, without warning the stranger of my approach. She had grown too absorbed in her task to notice events passing beside her; she was crouching down lower than the window-sill now, as though a face turned in her direc-

tion had scared her from her earnest gaze within. But she was listening still, and my advance towards her was unheeded.

Until I was at her side, I was unaware of the intruder's identity. I thought that it might be one of the servants at the Hall, but I was unprepared for Emma Eaves. My hand touched her lightly on the shoulder, and she sprang aside with a faint cry of surprise, and then looked up at me, still in her crouching position, through the shawl that was strained over her head in lieu of a bonnet.

"What are you doing here, Emma?"

"Listening," she answered.

"I am sorry for it."

"I have a right to listen here," she said, sullenly; "here they keep a secret from me."

"Come with me."

We went out of the garden together, crossed the road, and proceeded along the drive. Emma Eaves offered no resistance to the command I had urged, but asserted, after a short silence, her defence once more.

"I listen here sometimes—whenever I can get a chance, and those two men are together. They

know where your brother is, I am sure, although they did not speak of him, but were quarrelling when I first came."

"Quarrelling!" I exclaimed in my surprise.

"Ah! they quarrelled dreadfully," said Emma, "as though they mightn't have found another time to call each other names than this. And I thought that they would speak of Jack—your brother, just for an instant. He's in Scotland with Mr. Stewart—I thought he was all along. I knew this yesterday, by listening. You knew before, Miss?"

"Well?"

"And he will not stay there. He has given warning to leave, that I know. He gave warning last Christmas—oh! where will he go now?"

"We shall know shortly, Emma."

"*We!*"

"Yes. If you are interested in him still—still are grateful to him for that past kindness which saved *you*, I will tell you all the news I hear, on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you will abide by my advice, and commit no extravagance of conduct that may embarrass

him and you, and lead to harm. That you will not listen at doors and windows again, Em."

"I was anxious to know about John, and I felt that that Scotch Mr. Stewart was at the bottom of it. He meant well for John, but he never understood him. It is only I, knowing him better than you all, who could alter him, Miss Casey."

"I fear not."

"Oh! I could—I could indeed!" she said, persistently; "when I was a child I could persuade him to come home early, not to spend his money too fast, and when he was at home he was always so different! And now I am a woman," cried this girl not seventeen yet, "I can study him much better, and be always true to him, and think the best of him, which no one here does—which no one ever will!"

"You have more gratitude in your heart than most people, Em," I said; "if we could curb your impetuosity, a good woman might me made yet. But you must not think too much of my brother John—that is a bad thought to grow with your growth."

"No, a good one—for it keeps me good sometimes."

"How is that?"

"When I feel very wicked—dissatisfied with all here, even with Miss Isabel, who understands me best, because she is most like me—I try and fancy what John would think of me, and so steady down, Miss, by degrees."

"Would he have admired this night's actions?"

"I don't know—it was for his sake; I wanted to hear if he was in Edinburgh, and then to write to him, and ask if he would mind my coming back to keep his house."

"Emma, this is madness. This must never be."

"He would do me no harm. He would—marry me rather than any one should think harm of us."

"This is a great folly, which you and I, Emma, will talk more concerning—hark!"

Emma, who was nervous as well as excitable, came close to my side.

"What is it?"

"Some one coming down the path after us—some one running."

We waited; the first surprise over, there was no cause for alarm. Wilthorpe was a quiet homely place, in which there was nothing to fear. They were all good people in Wilthorpe, for directly a man went wrong he started for London, where there was more scope for his evil inclinations. So the village kept itself sweet and pure, and went a little behind the age, perhaps, but that we could put up with.

"They've found me out," said Emma; "if it's Richard Stewart, who did stare once or twice at the window, I'd rather not face his hard words. He can be very hard when he likes—you should have heard him to-night—oh! my goodness! He—" she leaned her head forward into the darkness, and added, "yes, it is Mrs. Kingsworth's man! I can't stay!" and away ran the girl at her topmost speed towards the Hall, leaving me to bear the whole brunt of the attack.

Richard Stewart, in an instant more, came running towards me, bare-headed and excited.

"So I have caught you!" he exclaimed, fiercely; "what have you heard or seen? Speak out!"

"Mr. Stewart!"

"Miss Casey!" he exclaimed, "I beg pardon. Where's that girl Eaves?"

"She has just left me. What do you want with her?"

"She has been listening at my window—I caught sight of her face a minute or two since—I must see her!"

"She was listening, Mr. Stewart—I drew her away from her position with a reprimand that I think will put an end to her bad habits. You must forgive her, wild and ill-trained as she is, for the sake of the motive which brought her to your house."

"What motive was that?"

"My brother, John Kingsworth, was her first friend; she believes that you and your brother are both acquainted with his present position—she is as anxious about it as if she were my brother's daughter."

"And she came thither with no other motive?"

"No."

"But she has been listening—the walls are thin, the curtains were not drawn before the window—I must know what she has heard!"

"Nothing that is worthy of your alarm, Mr. Stewart, I am sure."

"Has she told you, then——"

"She has only told me that you and your brother were quarrelling when she arrived, and that she had been disappointed in hearing no news of John."

"Quarrelling *when* she arrived," mused Richard Stewart—"that's well, then. That's bad enough, but it's well in one sense of the word. If she listen again, I shall wring her neck! If there's one thing more unfair and dishonest than another, it's this habit of Emma Eaves's; I would rather that she should break open my safe, and run away with the Lady-Day rents."

"I will ask you to forgive her for once, Mr. Stewart."

"I'll never forgive her!" he said, bluntly. "I am an unforgiving man."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"You will be sorry to hear news that more closely concerns you in less than an hour's time, Miss Casey."

"What news is that?" I asked, alarmed at his sudden change of tone.

"Let them tell you in there," he said, with an impatient gesture of his hand towards the Hall; "I do not go about croaking evil tidings—I will not be always the first to fling a shadow on your way."

"My brother!" I gasped.

"Confound your brother!" he said, rudely; "I was not thinking of him. How that man is always in your thoughts, and he's a fellow who had better be out of them, perhaps."

"Pray do not keep me in suspense, Mr. Stewart. If any accident has happened in my absence—and yet Emma would have known that—oh! what is it?"

"After all, it's nothing," he said, with an affected lightness of demeanour; "do not go on like this—you, who were always strong and brave, and yet so womanly. I am wrong—I don't see why anything should distress you much now—I'm a fool, Miss Casey, that's all!"

"I will ask you to tell me, Mr. Stewart," I said more firmly.

"No—I am an unlucky beggar—I'll tell you nothing," he cried; "I have prepared you for a little news, and now you'll not give way before

those people, and let them think a hundred things against you, or worry you to death with their detestable pity."

I guessed the truth, and it seemed to shiver against my heart like a lance against a suit of mail. I was on guard then, and I stood my ground bravely, even in the early days with the truth suddenly risen before me like a monster. Through the mist wherein I had groped, I saw all then, I thought—and though my hero sank still more to earth, I did not show my sorrow at his fall.

"I understand now. Your brother has proposed to Miss Mannington?"

"How quick you are!" he gasped; "yes, that's it. *You* don't mind this, I'm sure?"

"It's no business of mine to mind it," I replied coldly; "I am interested to a friend's extent, and I will wish them both, like a friend, every happiness in life."

"That's well—that's kind of you, Miss Casey," he said.

"I found out long ago that I was not suited for your brother—and long ago, sir, the fancy seized

me that he was growing fond of Mrs. Kingsworth's niece."

"You are mistaken," he said sharply.

"Have the events of to-day proved that I was wrong, then?"

"The events of to-day are not to be reconciled with anything," said he moodily; "do not ask me for my opinion of them—how they will end—or whose happiness they will affect? From to-day I give up every hope of understanding my fellow-creatures, for I find they do not understand themselves."

Emma Eaves's assertion flashed to me here.

"You have quarrelled with your brother about this engagement—you are sorry that it has occurred?"

"I am so sorry," he cried angrily "that if the choice had been offered me this afternoon between Mark's engagement to Miss Mannington, and Mark lying in his coffin, I would have chosen the latter."

"Oh! Mr. Richard—this is shameful and wrong!"

"I have told him what I would have done," said he; "I faced him with those words, and saw the

colour die out of his face, as though I had killed him with them. But he believed me—for he has never known me tell a lie."

"You have taken a false view of all this, Mr. Stewart."

"He says so too—and you and he should know best," he said; "but neither he nor you possess the power to alter my opinion. I have an unpleasant habit of sticking to it," he added with a bitter laugh.

"Neither this engagement nor my own was right in that opinion which you profess to think so good a one," I said a little bitterly in my turn.

"Ah! you are dwelling on that past advice which you extorted from me, and then blamed me for offering," he said; "well, if you had taken it, would there have been much harm done?"

"I could have taken no advice without a reason; if you had given me one then—which would have been more fair and honourable on your part—I might have thanked you more graciously."

I could see his eyes flashing at me in the dark

like a wild beast's. But his answer came, steady though suppressed.

"I had not a reason to offer you, Miss Casey," he said; "therefore it was beyond my power to turn you against my brother in this fashion. If I knew that there was a thought in his heart of Miss Mannington, and kept it back, why, then I am the dishonourable knave you think me."

"No—I do not think you that, Richard Stewart."

"I knew what was for the best—at least, I thought so in my shallow knowledge then," he answered moodily; "now, I am in doubt—I am in despair of ever knowing true from false—the glitter of pure gold from base metal. There, you do not understand me," he said tetchily; "you never will—I don't understand myself! But I know this—that if Mark had died this morning——"

"No, no, no—don't say that again!" I implored.

"Why not? I should have looked down upon his dead handsome face and said, he was an honest fellow, who tried to do his best in man's sight and

in God's. And now what can I say?—I who have thought that there was not such another man in all the world!"

He dashed his hands before his face and sobbed so violently, that my own heart felt breaking with his own. I had never stood a witness to a man wholly giving way to those emotions which are more natural to us women; least of all, had I anticipated standing a witness to this man's prostration—a man whose nerves had seemed of iron. I was shocked—alarmed—and yet full of sympathy for him in his distress. Those old sisterly feelings that I had had when I was likely to be allied to him some day, stole back and took me to his side.

"You have thought too seriously of this—you have taken to heart a false idea, I am sure of it. Courage—think of me, a weak woman, asking Richard Stewart to be courageous!"

My words roused him. Before I had finished, and withdrawn my hand from his arm, he was almost himself again, standing erect and away from me, abjuring in his pride all help and sympathy.

"I'm a bit of a fool," he said; "don't think that I ever made a girl of myself before—it's the first and the last time, damned if it isn't! I've been worried, and a man can't settle down all of a sudden, can he?"

"No."

"And I have thought so much of Mark, you see," he said apologetically; "he was always such a gentleman to me," with a great gulp; "though he was my younger brother, and I ought to have looked after him more. Instead of which, I looked up to him until now, and there's the failure!—I'm going home," he added brusquely.

"You and Mark have quarrelled, then?"

"Yes, and all the more fiercely for never having had a wry word before."

"You will be friends again in the morning. Neither he nor you are likely to bear malice."

"Malice, no!" said Richard Stewart; "but we are Stewarts, and are not likely to forget the hard words which we have exchanged. I keep mine, and they are iron bars and chains between Mark and me. After all, he *is* my dead brother," he said, gloomily reverting to the old simile; "the

brother I knew and esteemed is in his grave—this man has nothing in common with me. Good night."

He turned, and went back towards his cottage. It had been a bitter quarrel between the brothers, or I should have never been a witness to this new phase in Richard Stewart's character. Across the old love between the two had swept the whirlwind; and how it would affect the after lives, the after affection of men both singular in their habits, it was beyond me to conjecture.

I went on to the Hall revolving this in my mind, wondering whether it would ever be in my power to make them friends again, and thinking, far less than might have been imagined, of the engagement between Bel Mannington and the man who had tired so soon of me!

CHAPTER III.

CONGRATULATION.

IT was quite a picture of home happiness upon which I intruded in the drawing-room that night. I had dined alone, and then repaired thither, where I found Mrs. Kingsworth, Mr. Mannington and daughter. Mrs. Kingsworth sitting before the fire, with Bel Mannington at her feet, and her brother, smiling and complaisant, facing her.

The hand of the old lady was resting on the dark tresses of her niece, and the niece, with her chin supported by her hand, was looking steadily into the blazing coals after her future there, as many have looked before and since her time. But they were all bright faces, despite the thought upon them, and I was glad to find no shadow here, at

least. There were animation and interest in that face of my mistress even—she had lost that immobility of expression which had tired my patience with its vain pretension. She had not lived down the world yet, or her interest in it; she had struggled hard to do so, but there was evidence of her defeat in her looks that night, and I had seen it once or twice before. She was of the world yet, and had to play her part therein for the little time remaining. She could not see unto the end, or guess what next her part would be, ere the silver cord was loosed.

"Here is Miss Casey," she said as I entered, "what a time this visiting has taken you!—and we over-running with good news, too."

"News that will very much surprise Miss Casey also," said Mr. Mannington, rubbing one hand over the other; "come to the fire and hear the full particulars."

Thus adjured, I took my place between them, and Bel Mannington looked up into my face, and laughed, and blushed, and almost cried for joy.

"Bertie can guess it now, I'm sure," she said, "but we will not allow her, aunt. We will have

the luxury of telling this fine story all to ourselves. Pray do not speak, please."

She turned and faced me—crossing her hands in her lap and looking up at me. I could but smile back at her—the effort was not a hard one—and, thank God, I felt no envy at her happiness. Better for me, that he whom I had loved went wholly back, than hovered in the foreground, a misty figure that I could not grasp, to wring my heart with its ever-haunting presence. I could almost see him fade away now, and feel myself becoming stronger and lighter by the retrogression.

"This silly girl, then," said Mrs. Kingsworth once more, resting her hand on her niece's head for an instant, "before she has reached the sober and mature age of eighteen years, has been sought in marriage by a man twelve years her senior. What is more remarkable, she has been pleased to accept him, jumping at the first lover, as though she had no other chance, or her fortune would not bring her one, or she had grown very tired of old friends."

The satire flickering still about Mrs. Kings-

worth's altered mood, but scathing no one with its summer lightning.

"Neither tired of old friends, nor liking Mr. Stewart because he is the first man who says that he likes *me*," Bel added; "but choosing him before you all, because I am sure of happiness with him. Not loving you less—but him more!"

I was surprised at her boldness in asserting this, with a little heightened colour, but with no further evidence of embarrassment. Had she been a year older, she would have *acted* with more propriety.

"We are content to play minor parts now, Bel," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "I am pleased that he has made his choice here—a clever, earnest man, who is not likely to have chosen rashly, and who is the very man for you."

Not likely to have chosen rashly! How strangely her words sounded to me!

"Worth fifty thousand pounds, if he's worth a farthing!" said Mr. Mannington, beginning to rub his hands together again.

"If he had been a beggar he should have had her," said Mrs. Kingsworth, quietly putting down the more sordid satisfaction of her brother, "for he

is a man who can take care of her, shield her with his strength from all that the world might do in its intensity of scorn for a weak, impassioned, and unreasonable girl. He is a shield to save her from herself, and I am thankful for his coming!"

"What a poor weak thing you are making of me, aunt!" Bel whimpered; "and what will Mr. Stewart think of me if he ever hear you going on like this?"

"With Mr. Stewart to take care of you, you will become a different woman. You have a very delightful fear of him and his firmness, and, if I know Mr. Stewart, that will not wear off upon acquaintance with him. I never could manage you —but he will!"

Bel laughed saucily.

"With his love—in the good time, aunt."

"It's an odd fancy of his, and an odd fancy of yours, considering all things," mused Mrs. Kingsworth; "but it has brought you two together, and I had an odd fancy too, long ago, that it might come to pass. When Mr. Stewart bore down my patronage, asserted his own independence, and set me almost against him, I used to think what a hus-

band he would make for Bel. There's tigress-taming in his eyes!"

"Aunt, I shall not like him—I shall try and tame him if you go on like that, just to show you *my* power!"

"I would not advise the attempt," said Mrs. Kingsworth, and Bel laughed at her aunt's dry response.

"Miss Casey knows that it was not an odd fancy of mine," said Bel; "it was a spell, under which I felt myself powerless. I own that—I am not ashamed of him, or of my love for him. I know that I am not worthy of him yet, but I will try, and he will not love me less for the efforts I will make."

"Pray be more rational and womanly now, Bel," said Mrs. Kingsworth, almost in entreaty; "you are worth coming in search of, and it may not be well to estimate—even at too high a rate—Mr. Stewart's intentions! Be dignified even in your happiness, my child."

And with this peroration dignified in itself, Mrs. Kingsworth rose to withdraw.

"I am going to my study now," she said,

in answer to Mr. Mannington's inquiring look.

"Can I be of any service?" was the quick question of her brother.

"No. It is Lady-Day, and I have my rents to estimate, and a host of material business to consider. Good night."

She withdrew, and Bel Mannington resumed her old recumbent position, after first finding a comfortable rest for her head against my knees. Mr. Mannington asked a few questions about the friends I had met, and the general state of village affairs, biting his nails meanwhile, and fidgeting uneasily in his seat. Finally, he rose, and, muttering something about the library, went out of the room.

Bel, relieved by her father's presence, immediately dashed into her one engrossing subject. How happy she was, how happy she should ever be from that day!—how she had hoped against hope when she met Mark Stewart first in Edinburgh, and yet how she had tried her best to interest him and to win him by every modest effort which was in her power, and yet should not betray her interest or eagerness. It was a *naive* confes-

sion, and I sat and listened patiently. Once the thought crossed me with a stiletto keenness as to what share this girl had had in the downfall of my love-dream; but I dismissed it, and did my best to second Bel in all her present thoughts. To see her bright face, her sparkling eyes, her cheeks flushed with the excitement which her happiness had brought her, was to wish that she might find a husband worthy of the love she betrayed by every word that night.

I offered my congratulations with no cold heart —I was proud of my own composure, my wishes for her lasting happiness.

She would have rambled on all night, had not Mr. Mannington returned. Then preferring her own thoughts to her father's remarks on matters foreign to her one engrossing theme, she darted away to her room and left Mr. Mannington standing by the fireside looking at me.

I did not admire his looks that night; I felt an antagonistic feeling rising against him, and a difficulty in subduing it which I could not resist. It was a look of self-satisfied cunning, that for once aroused my indignation and set me on defence. I

was standing also, I remember, and I returned his gaze until his eyelids drooped.

"What have you done with your diamond ring, Miss Casey?"

"Given it back to the donor when I had no further use for it, Mr. Mannington."

"It was not a gift, then?"

"Yes, sir—it was."

"I thought that you told me——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Mannington, I told you nothing concerning the ring that I deny at this time."

"I am sorry for your own sake that you ever received this gift from Mr. Stewart."

He said it in a whisper, as though it were still a secret which I might wish to keep.

"I have erred from want of judgment; we may all regret that, sir. Who told you this?"

"I have known it from the day you went to Wilthorpe Church in the rain," he replied; "I generally am pretty correct in my information. I was very sorry then to think that you should have allowed yourself to be misled by a few specious phrases. I had a better opinion of your shrewdness."

"Thank you for your opinion, sir—I have not asked for it."

It was a pert answer, but he winced at it. I was vexed at his contemptuous manner—his new and probably his real manner which it pleased him to adopt that evening. He was cowed at once, for he was far from a bold man—in the way of his bravery, or his insolence, stood ever his nervousness.

"I—I beg pardon, Miss Casey. This is only a friendly remark of mine—I really was very sorry, though it was not my place to interfere, of course. Mrs. Kingsworth was very sorry too."

"She knew this?"

"Yes—and went to Edinburgh to stop it, I am inclined to think."

"And your daughter Isabel?"

"Knew nothing. For her sake, I hope is to know nothing. We cannot alter the bygones," he added quite philosophically.

"For her sake, I may be silent. I am not certain if Mr. Stewart will be, however," said I; "he is a man of honour, and will tell your daughter."

"He may—I don't think he will. There is no-

thing dishonourable in keeping back a folly like this."

"A folly—or a mistake, I do not assert anything to the contrary."

I went out of the room with my blood a little heated. I went direct to Mrs. Kingsworth's study, full of one thought besetting me. Mr. Manningtón had not calculated on my rapidity of action. It was my new plan for dissipating mysteries, and had answered well at present.

"Come in," said Mrs. Kingsworth to my knock. I entered, and found her bending over her library table, writing busily—the table lamp close against her face, lighting up the thought and intensity thereon. As I entered, and advanced, she spread a large sheet of blotting-paper over that which she had been writing, and then, pen in hand, looked up impatiently.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I am sorry to intrude—I have a question to ask which you will excuse, Mrs. Kingsworth. You went first to Edinburgh with the thought of making up a match between Mr. Stewart and your niece?"

"Yes."

"You had heard that—that Mr. Stewart was likely to be married to another lady?"

"There were rumours of a widow somewhere—I did not believe them. Why?"

"You thought that he was free?"

"Yes."

"I believe you, madam—I am glad to hear it. Good night."

She looked after me inquiringly, but made no effort to stop me until I was at the door. Then she arrested my progress with a different purpose.

"Miss Casey," she said, "you may as well take your brother's cheque—I have written it out this evening."

She held it towards me, and I returned and took it from her, thanking her, for John Casey's sake.

"This is a memorable Lady-day," she said; "good-night to *you*, Miss Casey."

I went to my room with my brother John's cheque in my hand, thankful that I had proved Mrs. Kingsworth innocent of plotting against me. It might have pleased Mr. Mannington to sow

dissension between my mistress and me, but he had failed in his effort, and I was glad that she had not guessed my secret as her brother had. I had more faith in her and less in her brother from that night.

It was later that night when I went downstairs again. Approaching her study, though the hour was late, I saw the gleam of light athwart the corridor; passing it, I was aware of the butler and Mr. Mannington's valet and factotum standing in the room watching her signature. They were looking perplexed and out of place with their hands behind them, and their stolid gaze directed to the document.

"You see this—now sign here as witnesses."

I passed on unobserved. Mrs. Kingsworth had been re-writing her will that night.

CHAPTER IV.

"GIVING WAY."

FAIR reader, have you ever sat quietly in a corner and seen the man who should have been courting you, or the man whose fancies you would have wished in your heart had strayed towards you, paying his attentions or developing his *in*tentions in another direction? It is a singular sensation, and I pray that you may have been spared it. It is sitting apart from life with a thorn in your side, watching the course of actions flowing away from you, and interested in spite of yourself with all the deeds and doings which make others happy and you so miserable.

It was my lot to feel this, or something like this. I had played my part out in the little life drama —the curtain was down for good, the musicians

who had piped such happy music had gone home, and I was alone without an audience in empty space. It was dreary work to sit still in my loneliness; more dreary when the time came to see Bel act my part to the old lover, and the music steal back again to make *her* heart light, and bewilder her with the bright world from which I was shut out.

It was dreary work, but I was not jealous of Bel Mannington. Now and then an ugly spasm shot through me, as a chance word or look reminded me of my share in the past drama; but it left no wound, and disturbed but for a moment the even tenor of my way. I taught myself to consider that everything had been for the best, and that I should not have been happy with Mr. Stewart. I was not "a lady born;" I was sure that I was prim and methodical; I was always alike; therefore his interest would have diminished and died out in time, leaving me a spiritless and neglected wife. It was different with Bell; she was capricious, variable, and always winning, whether in her good tempers or her bad ones. She was weak and impulsive and required a strong man's love to keep

her strong; she aroused a man's desire to protect her by her childlike innocence and trust—one could see that if she were left alone in the world, or placed side by side with one who had been tempted by her money, she would die. Consequently an object of interest to all right-thinking men.

The fair reader, whom I conjured at the opening of the chapter, may possibly think that I forgave too readily my runaway lover in my heart. I was of a forgiving disposition, perhaps, or I made due allowance for extenuating circumstances, for I treasured up no wrongs against Mark Stewart. I should have been considered a strong-minded woman, and more of a heroine, had I vowed revenge for his duplicity, and stalked through the remainder of these pages with a dagger and bowl, and my hair down my back.

I settled the matter in my own mind somewhat after this fashion. He had been too quick to love me; coming from the stir of business to a country life, the change had unsettled him, and he had rashly offered me his hand. Going back to Edinburgh, the first impression had weakened somewhat; he had put off—yes, *put off* was the word now!—

our marriage for two years. He wanted time to consider whether he were justified in keeping his word, and whilst considering, he met Bel Mannington, and fell in love with her. She was different to most women, and I was like the general pattern, neither better nor worse. She was original, and I was commonplace; hence the odious comparison, becoming more suggestive, as Bel showed too plainly her interest in him. So the *coup d'état* at the Woundell ball, and Bertie Casey *solus!*

Mr. Stewart came twice courting to the Hall. On the second day he told us that he was compelled to return to Edinburgh on the morning of the third. In a few weeks he should come back to Wilthorpe, and take away his bride; he objected to long engagements, they were very unlucky, he whispered to Bel, who communicated his assertion to me shortly afterwards—a burst of confidence, that brought on one of those spasms before alluded to, for it showed a vivid contrast, that was humiliating to me.

It was strange to see Mr. Stewart at the Hall—sitting quite at home in the drawing-room by Bel Mannington's side, talking with Mrs. Kings-

worth in an easy, friendly way, so greatly at variance with the past satirical converse, and even paying deference to the opinions of his future father-in-law, on matters political or social. Strange, perhaps, to witness how completely Mrs. Kingsworth could bury the hatchet, and smoke the calumet of peace at her own fireside; it seemed as if she restrained the natural acrimony of her disposition, out of pure gratitude for Mr. Stewart relieving her of her great responsibility. She made up for her complaisance to Mr. Stewart by an extra degree of invective against her brother, who bore Mrs. Kingsworth's attacks with wonderful equanimity, laughing whenever there was a chance, and but betraying his nervous temperament when his sister was particularly persistent.

Mr. Stewart seldom spoke to me. He had not become accustomed to our new positions yet, and he did not look at me, or address me, even with that old frankness, characteristic of his antecourting days. He was not looking well either; his face seemed a troubled and a thoughtful one to me—at least, I had known it very different.

The good folk at the Hall were all content with

him, and it was not my place to remark upon the change. I was behind the scenes, and knew that he had quarrelled with his brother, and was staying at Wilthorpe Inn, instead of at the cottage; and I believe that a difference with the brother, whom he had always highly valued, would affect him, despite his pride and self-command. It must affect him, for Richard Stewart had been as near to his heart as he had been to his brother's; through all the hardening process of a business life, that affection had kept pure and strong, I knew.

On the morning of the third day he came to the Hall to inform us that he had made up his mind to remain one day longer in Wilthorpe; it did not seem so easy a task to leave Bel as it had been to leave me, and stab No. 3 or No. 4 ensued in consequence. That was my last stitch in the heart; I remember no more unpleasant sensations caused by the changes that had followed my first love's disruption.

He and Bel Mannington went for a long stroll together that morning—the first lover's walk in which they had indulged—the last until his return

in the summer-time. Bel went out rejoicing; her hand was on his arm when they were in the Hall; and had come face to face with Richard Stewart, who had arrived on business.

Crossing the Hall, I was a witness to their meeting; the stiff inclination of the head, the brusque "Good morning, Miss Mannington," of Richard Stewart, as he bustled past them in the direction of Mrs. Kingsworth's study. I noticed that Mark Stewart looked for an instant after his brother, then, with an inch or two added to his height, went out into the sunshine with his betrothed.

They did not return together, somewhat to Mrs. Kingsworth's surprise.

"Where is the gay cavalier, Bel?" asked the aunt.

"He has a little business to complete; he will not be here till the evening."

Mrs. Kingsworth was completing *her* business with Richard Stewart, who was still in her study deep in accounts. Bel Mannington would not have intruded upon her aunt had the study door not been open, and Mrs. Kingsworth not too ab-

sorbed in facts and figures to forget passing events.

"Business in Wilthorpe—how's that, Stewart?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"It's no business of mine, at any rate," growled Richard Stewart. "Will you see that the money's right, please? Three thousand, seven hundred pounds."

"I have already counted it. Take it to my bankers this afternoon—I do not like so much money in my house or yours."

"Safer than in the banker's hands, sometimes!" he said, sententiously.

Bel Mannington and I went up-stairs together, Bel very silent and ruminative.

"You are sorry that Mr. Stewart is going away, Bel?" I said.

"Sorry, naturally," she answered, "for he has made me happy in Wilthorpe until now."

"Has anything happened, Bel? You have not quarrelled?"

"Quarrelled! no. I hope we love each other too much ever to quarrel—too much ever to have any secrets from each other that can tend in any

way to the exchange of one harsh word. Bertie, he has told me—oh! I daren't tell you, I daren't tell anybody—forget I have said one word. But I am going mad, I think, with a new horror that has sprung up like a serpent in the midst of my path. I must crush it, for his sake!"

I looked at her, bewildered. Her outburst was so sudden and vehement, and, above all, so utterly incomprehensible. Had he told her, despite his request to me to hold my peace, his story of our fleeting engagement, and what it had ended in?

"Has he said anything that shakes your faith in him—or others?" I could not refrain from asking.

"Everything that strengthens it!" she cried, proudly. "Everything that leads me to love him better, and make every sacrifice for him. There, don't tempt me with those great wistful eyes of yours to tell you anything, for I am as firm as a rock, and not to be led from my allegiance. Go away, please—say nothing of this—I shall come downstairs again as light as a lark, with no one the wiser for this nonsense. Oh! what a foolish girl I am!"

She flung herself upon her knees at her bedside, and hid her face there; in that position—thinking, praying, or weeping—I left her. It was possible that Mark Stewart had made an open confession of his past attachment, and that it had unsettled her, as everything apart from the placid current of events was destined to unsettle her through life, for good or evil. Presently she would steal to my side, and I might tell her my own version of the story. She came down-stairs the old Bel Mannington, and I gave her more credit for the art of disguising her thoughts than I had ever done before. After luncheon I went to my own room, and being in a thoughtful mood myself, opened my window and looked across the fair landscape of park-land towards the village. A bright afternoon for the end of March—quite a spring day, with the sun shining, the birds singing, the lawn in front of the great house a vivid green that was pleasant to look upon. The deer were basking in the sunshine again, there seemed light and life beyond my room —on such a bright day as this I had first come to the Hall. I was not sorry for the change even now; if I had met with trouble, it had not done

me harm, and I was not unhappy—far from it! Presently—very shortly—I should be myself again—jogging on in life as though nothing had happened. Presently I should be away from Wilthorpe, I thought—when Bel Mannington had married Mr. Stewart, Mrs. Kingsworth would have found a better guardian for her niece, and then an end to all my services! What a poor guardian I had been,—I thought! of more use as friend and companion to Mrs. Kingsworth than to Bel; and yet my mistress had implied more than once that with Bel's marriage my term of office would expire at Wilthorpe, and I should retire on my pension. More than once, too, I had fancied that she was testing my affection for Wilthorpe by these means, but time would show, and I would not let the future harass me. The past and present were enough to occupy my thoughts just then.

Sitting at my window watching, I became conscious of a distant figure coming towards the house—lost to me now and then by the circuitous turns of the carriage-drive. A figure that in the distance had made me start with its resemblance to my brother—which I thought, judg-

ing from past actions, and his last letter, was more likely than not to be his. I should be sorry to find John Kingsworth Casey on his way towards me again; I should read therefrom an ill augury of his new career. Turning away from life with Mr. Stewart, he would turn away from one more friend he had been fortunate enough to find, and wilful enough to give up.

I watched very anxiously for the next appearance of the stranger. There were gaps of trees and hedge-rows on the park side of the drive, and through the apertures I should see him presently. He came much nearer, and, as if to assist me in my effort at identification, the stranger paused, and went to the edge of the path to survey more clearly the landscape which opened to his view there. Yes, it was my brother John!

I watched him for a while, irresolved whether to meet him in the drive or to let him come to the Hall and face Mrs. Kingsworth. I sprang from my post of observation with the instinct to adopt the former method, when the idea seized me that he might not be coming to pay a visit to me.

Had he wished to see me alone he would

scarcely have walked in the sunshine towards the Hall; he might have business with my mistress, and she might require a little preparation before his advent. I remembered one occasion when his coming to Wilthorpe had very much disturbed her.

Fraught with this new idea, I went downstairs in search of Mrs. Kingsworth. I found her in the drawing-room alone, standing by the window and shading her eyes with her thin hands. As I entered the room she turned round almost impatiently.

"Oh! it is you!" she said. "Come here, Miss Casey, and tell me who this is coming up the drive?"

"I have seen him from the window of my room."

"Your brother Kingsworth?"

"Yes."

"One need not be very much surprised at his presence here to-day—he is eccentric in his actions, and erratic in his progress. Poor fool! it is his inheritance, and you and I, sober women interested in him, can make due allowance for his eccentricity."

"If he wish to see you, madam——"

"Oh! he will not wish to see me," she interrupted; "he is coming for his cheque, as usual."

"Shall I go to him, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"Oblige me by sitting still and curbing your natural affection for a time. Three years ago, or thereabouts, Bertha Casey, I met him at the Cork-cutters' Hall—that was the last meeting I ever cared to have with him."

The door opened and a servant entered.

"Mr. Casey wishes to see Mrs. Kingsworth for a few moments."

"Admit him," replied this inconsistent woman immediately.

Mrs. Kingsworth waited very patiently, I very nervously, until he was ushered into the drawing-room. When he entered I ran to him and kissed him, and he held me at arm's length to more critically survey me.

"You have altered, Bertie—you are not looking so well and strong as usual. How is this?"

"I am very well, John. And you?"

"Oh! I was never better in my life."

He turned to address Mrs. Kingsworth, and I

had more opportunity to survey him. He was looking better and stronger than I had ever seen him. There was a new look upon his face—something expressive of less irresolution than I had been a witness hitherto. It was not alone that he was better dressed, I felt assured.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Kingsworth," he said, bowing quite gracefully towards us. "I hope that my presence here has not taken you very much by surprise."

"I am never surprised!" was the cold answer; "you should know that by this time?"

"I wish I could make the same assertion, dear madam," he replied; "my life has been one series of surprises."

"What have you seen or heard to be surprised at in your profitless career?"

"Not quite profitless in the latter days," he answered; "but we will not argue that. And as for my surprises—well, considering what a scamp I have been all my life, my greatest astonishment is that I have one friend left."

"Have you come from Edinburgh to tell me this?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth, caustically.

"Scarcely."

"Then sit down and let me hear, in the first place, what you want with me?"

He sat down, thus adjured, turning to me with a bright and confident smile, so very new and strange, that my heart thrilled with a hope of hearing good news from him, and of him, for the first time. Mrs. Kingsworth, to my watchful eyes, too, seemed interested in his more manly bearing.

"I am here, Mrs. Kingsworth, to surprise you with my audacity," he said frankly; "to thank you more heartily than I have hitherto done for all past favours, and to ask you for one more."

"I admire your boldness, or presumption."

"And you will hear me out, at all events. Bertie, come a little closer, girl, and sustain my courage, which begins to flag. By Jove!" he cried, more to himself than to his company, "I thought that I should have got through this appeal swimmingly, but I'm giving way already."

"You have given way all your life, Kingsworth," said his godmother.

"Ah! so I have. I acknowledge the justice of the reproof."

He seemed to grow more nervous, and to drop into his old ways by degrees. The past habit of twitching nervously at the end of his moustache began to creep upon him, till he shook it off with an effort.

"Mrs. Kingsworth," he said, rapidly and clearly, never shrinking from the steady gaze directed at him, but meeting it with one as unfaltering and earnest, "I have been troubling my head lately with thoughts of what a kind and liberal godmother you have been to me, and what an unthankful brute I have proved myself in return. My post at Mr. Stewart's—Mr. Stewart's interest in me—my new life, with an example ever before me of how much can be done by industry and perseverance, have all tended to these new thoughts of mine. Mr. Stewart has been to me a good friend rather than a master—keeping me to my work, and showing an interest in me more unaccountable than yours. I think that he has made a man of me."

"This is good news to begin with, Kingsworth," said my mistress; "now the proofs?"

"My proofs are in Mr. Stewart's testimony to the change in me—I am sure that he will give me a good turn by offering his evidence, if necessary."

"Say that we take all this flourish of trumpets for the proclamation of a gospel truth, what then?"

"Simply this," he said, slightly hesitating again, "that I have an idea of leaving Mr. Stewart, and setting up in the wholesale business on my own account. In a small way at first, of course—and in Glasgow instead of Edinburgh. I understand the workings of his business well enough—I was always naturally quick, if you remember, and I'm sure of doing well in time. I have the courage to work, and the patience to wait."

"Is Mr. Stewart aware of this?"

"Yes."

"When do you leave his service?"

"I left it on Lady-Day, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"At your own request?"

He coloured at this cross-examination.

"N—no," he said, hesitating a second time, "at his own."

"I see," was the dry comment.

"No, pardon me, but you do not see, Mrs. Kingsworth," he replied; "you are completely in the dark."

"I have been too deep a woman all my life to remain hoodwinked long," she said, conceitedly, even a little angrily. "Go on. This is a long story."

"I communicated my idea to Mr. Stewart, and though candidly he expressed a few objections, he said that in my place he would attempt it. If he had wholly disapproved of my plan, or had had his doubts of my success, he would not have scrupled to have said so, and advised me to a different course."

"If he had nothing else to think about, save your chimeras."

"Granted, madam, that possibility. Now we come to the favour—to the means of rising in the world."

"Ah!"

Mrs. Kingsworth clutched her stick more firmly.

"With two thousand pounds in hand, I can make a start. If I start well, and give proof of

going on well, my bankers will advance two thousand more at the end of the year. Thence to fortune!"

"This is the dream of Alnaschar over again!" said Mrs. Kingsworth, contemptuously.

"I hope not. You do not know what a different man I am, madam."

"No, I do not," she said; "and now, sir, is it possible that you are sanguine enough to expect me to advance two thousand pounds."

"I will repay you the money in five years——"

"I shall be in my grave!"

"I will resign at once my annual income," he continued, taking no heed of her interpolation; "God knows, that I am anxious to surrender that now. I feel the burden of my dependence heavily enough, whatever proof I am offering now to the contrary."

"Mr. Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth, "it does not take me long to make up *my* mind in this matter. You are dismissed from Mr. Stewart's service——"

"With a good character," he added.

"And you, with the old mania for change, think

of a new life and talk of a large fortune rewarding you in the future. I have no more faith in this new scheme than I have ever had in you. I will not assist it with one penny of my money."

"Very well, madam; I scarcely expected it. You have shown so much interest in me that I thought I would not lose the chance."

"Go back to Mr. Stewart's and be content."

"No, I shall not go back there," was the firm answer.

"Ask him to lend you the two thousand pounds —he should know more of this great transition than I."

"No, I shall not ask Mr. Stewart."

"If it be not an impertinent question, may I ask what you will do, now?"

"Turn clerk again, somewhere in Scotland. I like Scotland and the Scotch people, madam. I know," he added, "that I do not deserve any help, any assistance—that now, in my future efforts to keep straight, I shall feel the clog of my backward years for ever retarding my progress. But for all this, I shall not go back again to the old life—I have outlived it!"

"You have learned to talk very neatly," said Mrs. Kingsworth, "and possibly to add hypocrisy to your other accomplishments—I cannot say—you are made up of inconsistencies, like other people. Miss Casey, give your brother his cheque, and let him go."

"It is the last cheque I shall ever receive from you, Mrs. Kingsworth. Some day, I may repay all that I am indebted to you. I am not very disappointed at your decision, despite my sanguine nature; I knew that I was unworthy of your assistance. You will allow me to withdraw?"

"With pleasure, sir."

"Allow me also to see one more friend, whom I left for her own good, cruelly and unceremoniously. Em is still with you, Bertie?"

"Yes."

"Has she forgotten me?—been taught to despise my weakness, my want of moral strength, the easiness with which I was always deceived?" he asked quite bitterly.

"No, you are always first in her thoughts," I answered.

"Then, by heaven, I will ask her to be my wife

to-day!" he cried; "I have never forgiven myself stealing away from her like a thief—and worse than a thief, for I went away with a lie in my mouth. I turned off the only one in all the world who saw the little good in me, and shut her eyes to all the evil. If she will wait for me a year, I'll come and fetch her."

"*If you dare!*" said Mrs. Kingsworth, pointing her stick at him with a hand that shook despite her efforts to keep cool and firm—"if you dare to think of so base an alliance—you, my godson, to ask a servant in my household to become your wife! Begone, sir!"

"I'll see Emma Eaves."

"Miss Casey, if you give your brother that cheque I wrote out, it will be felony! Tear it up —where is it?"

"Tear it up, if you will," said my brother doggedly, "I'll see Emma Eaves."

"Do you know, sir, that I detest that girl!" cried Mrs. Kingsworth.

"She was a good friend to me when she was a child. I saved her from the workhouse," said he, "and if she be not happy here, why, I must save

her from her high estate and take her down to mine. Mrs. Kingsworth, you will not interfere with me in this—you must not!"

"I am a proud woman—do not disgrace the second name I gave you. Go away now, and come back in a year's time to tell me this."

"Meanwhile, you will trust to my variable nature to work a change in me. Mrs. Kingsworth, this was my idea before I ever knew you."

"Was it?—was it?" she echoed; "go then with your base thoughts, your childish dreams, your weakness, and your folly, away from me, never to come into my presence again without my cursing you for a man who has balked every hope I ever had of him. Go, if you please, most chivalrous gentleman!"

She struggled hard not to give way—to be the Mrs. Kingsworth who had ever preserved a bold front to the world and the world's attacks upon her. At what cost she succeeded I could not tell, but the effort was successful, and the last words rang out hard and vibratory, as though struck upon an anvil. She reached a book from the table with a hand that trembled no more with the agitation

at her heart, and then, by an ingenious twist to herself and her chair, turned her back upon her godson.

It was better for all that the interview should end thus, and I signed to Kingsworth to withdraw with me. He murmured a good afternoon, to which there was no response, and followed me into the hall, where a pale and large-eyed girl was waiting to spring upon his neck.

"What! Em!"

"Jack—John—Mr. Casey!" cried Emma, correcting one appellative after another, as she rushed into his arms. "Oh! why did you leave me all this time?"

"I'll tell you. Walk a little way with me down the avenue, Em. Bertie," turning to me, "I shall not leave till to-morrow morning—come to me at Mr. Stewart's cottage to-morrow, before ten o'clock."

"I will come to-night."

"I may not be at home to-night. I have so much to tell you. Can *you* trust me with this wild Irish girl?" he asked, in a lighter tone.

"You are your own master," I answered, sadly

They went out together, and I returned to the drawing-room, heated, perplexed, and full of excitement. Mrs. Kingsworth was at the window again, watching his departure.

"Your brother is mad, Miss Casey," she said, without turning round to me; "we shall have to lock him up in an asylum."

"Not so bad as that, I hope."

"To have grown so weak and foolish!"

"Madam, I don't know—I can't say," I said, excitedly; "but may not this be as wise a step as it is generous?"

"Are you mad too?" she said, turning round at this.

"I hope not. But the only woman who has ever understood John Kingsworth Casey may be the one most fitting to be his helpmate."

"She will drag him lower still. But"—with a little tap of her stick on the floor—"it is no business of mine. However he acts will not *surprise* me now. I have done with him."

"You have been his best friend, madam—you will remain so!"

"I have been his enemy—I have supplied him

with the means to his own ruin year by year—and now I have done with him. Where is that cheque?"

I had brought it down with me from my room to give to John. I tendered it unwillingly to her.

She snatched it from me, dropped her stick, and held it between her two hands tightly.

"He will do better without it," she muttered.

The instant afterwards she forced it back into my hands, dropped into her chair, picked up her stick, and tapped the floor with it.

"Give it him before he goes away, the profligate! Tell him that I have done with him, mind, now—and that it is the last cheque he will ever have from me!"

She was right.

CHAPTER V.

MR. STEWART'S LAST NIGHT IN WILTHORPE.

WHEN Emma Eaves returned, she sought me at once in my own room. She came in with a face beaming with delight.

"I am to tell you everything—to conceal nothing from you!" she cried.

"What is the news, Emma?"

"Your brother John has promised to make me his wife in a year's time—if I do not see any one better, meanwhile. As if that were likely!"

"You will be a strange couple."

"You will say nothing to turn him from me? Oh! I am so happy!—I shall be for ever after this so very happy!"

She clapped her hands in her enthusiasm, as

Bel Mannington might have done under similar circumstances.

"If this marriage ever take place, Emma, you will remember that with you rests my brother's future happiness?"

"Yes. I shall remember it—I have never forgotten it. I always understood him, Miss Bertha," she added, proudly. "I always knew the exact moment when the money or the drink was troubling him; and though I was but a child, I could persuade him very often to his good."

"Ah! a child could always persuade him," I added, somewhat sadly.

"And now I am a woman, with the child's love stronger and better, I know that I shall be of help to him. There's no one loves him like me—not you."

"No—you first, Emma, now," I said.

"And yet you would have set him against me!—I knew it all along—and that turned me against you sometimes, though I tried hard not, because you were his sister."

"I set him against you, Emma! Never!"

"You kept him from me—you never told me where he was!"

"For your sake!"

"And when you wrote to him, you always had a word to say against me. He was sure of it."

"He!—who?"

She coloured and hesitated.

"Was it Mr. Mannington?" I cried.

"Hush!—yes—after he had found out somehow that I was fond of John, and fretting about him, he told me that you stood in the way between him and me; and that—that you were jealous of me."

"He is a man with whom it is best to have no confidence," said I; "he has not told you the truth."

"I hoped he had not very often."

"Let me think of this quietly, now—before the dinner-bell rings, Emma, I must consider Mr. Mannington's reasons for this."

When she had gone, I marshalled the reasons before me. They were quickly arrived at—I think I saw then clearly to the end. Mr. Mannington was conscious of his sister's liberality—jealous of it. He knew too well his sister's pride, also, and he thought that if he set Emma against me, Emma,

who was unsettled and unhappy, would seek out John, and disgrace herself and my brother in Mrs. Kingsworth's eyes. Then the money would stop, and he, as future heir, perhaps, would be so many hundred pounds the richer man. Had he known at that time—which he did not—my brother's address in Edinburgh, he might have succeeded better in his scheme. He was jealous of me, too—and of Mrs. Kingsworth's kindness. He would have made Emma a spy upon me, and worked my own disgrace, had it been possible—but that had ever been beyond his power to effect.

I thought of the discovery he had made of my engagement to Mr. Stewart, and how he had scrupulously kept back that secret with me, not for my sake, but against it. I saw then, perhaps, my own mistake, and how Mrs. Kingsworth's sense of right might have broken through the web of circumstance, and found a different husband for her niece. My own mistake—after all, was it a mistake, or had it all happened for the best—for Bel Mannington and me?

Mr. Stewart did not dine with us that night. After dinner we were scattered again; and it was

not till nine o'clock that Mr. Mark Stewart arrived, and we met together in the drawing-room, and set our varied thoughts aside to give him welcome. I was glad that he had come, for I had been very anxious to ask him one question about my brother.

The difficulty was to find an opportunity. He sought Bel's company, and took his place by her side as his legal right. He was in a thoughtful mood, despite his attention to passing events; I knew his moods by intuition, as well as most people. Though he never lost the thread of discourse, I felt assured that thoughts foreign to the hour were crossing and recrossing his mind. It was his last night in Wilthorpe; he was going back to business in Edinburgh once more; in his last campaign he had been the gainer of Bel Mannington's love, and the loser of his brother's reverence—he might be thinking of both victory and loss in that hour.

Bel Mannington was in high spirits — forced spirits to a certain extent. I was assured that she was sorry to think of this conclusion to her brief courting days—that the lover was going away for awhile to his old world. Still she seemed to do

her best to resist the thoughts of separation; her cheeks were flushed, and her dark eyes aflame with excitement. Looking at her, and watching her efforts to appear the same Bel Mannington, I thought of that madness, which, it had been whispered at the Woundell ball, was a part of her inheritance. Mrs. Kingsworth, who was not inclined for conversation, glanced frequently in her niece's direction, when the laugh was wilder than usual; once I saw Mr. Stewart regarding her attentively, even sorrowfully.

Mrs. Kingsworth called her niece to her side after a time, and spoke at some length to her; taking advantage of this opportunity, I crossed to Mr. Stewart, conscious of Mr. Mannington objecting to the proceeding by his nervous writhe upon his chair. The little man's sordid mind saw only an effort on my part to regain mylost position; and he kept a watch upon us over the newspaper that he affected to peruse.

"You leave to-morrow morning, Mr. Stewart?"

"At two to-morrow, Miss Casey, probably. Short time for rest before I depart from this eventful village."

"So early as that!—I am glad that I have taken this opportunity to speak to you about my brother John."

"What of him?"

"He is in Wilthorpe—you are aware of this?"

"No—I was not aware of it. It is likely enough," he replied; "he left my service on Lady-Day."

"For what reason?"

"Miss Casey," he said, flinching a little at my impetuous question, "there were many reasons, which I cannot afford time to explain just now."

"You distrusted him, Mr. Stewart, and you fear to wound me by the declaration."

"I assure you that a want of confidence in your brother was not the cause of our separation. He was anxious to do better, for one reason—will you think that sufficient?"

"I must think that, if you fear to trust me."

"To trust you!" he exclaimed, quite impetuously. "Miss Casey, I only wish that I had trusted——"

He stopped abruptly, and I did not press him for the sequel to his speech. I was afraid of it, and I distrusted *him* just then.

"You were speaking of your brother," he said, reverting to the old topic; "you are anxious about him, Miss Casey?"

"Yes."

"Two years ago, you were anxious about him, and I set myself to study him, as though he had been a brother of mine;" he went on hurriedly after this, for he had detected my colour rising somewhat. "I saw what was good in him, and what was weak, and I did my best to follow him step by step, teaching him, by the force of example, the best precepts that I knew, and checking him—without his suspicion of my interest—in any step which directed him, however slightly, into the old channel. I was an egotist, Miss Casey, and I thought that I was clever enough and had power enough to cure him. I had been always vain of my knowledge of character, and of my influence over my fellow-men, and here was a case in which I exulted. He was my patient, and I was his physician; and whether I failed or succeeded, the future must determine—I cannot."

He rose as if he were tired of the subject—as if he had been led to say more than he had intended.

It was a new gratitude, unakin to the old love in every respect, that led me to thank him.

"I did not know that you had taken so much trouble with my brother," I said, rising also; "how can I thank you?"

"It was no trouble—in those days it was a duty of mine. Please say no more, Miss Casey."

"I will say that your efforts have not been unrewarded—he has changed for the better, sir."

"You see a change in him?—I am glad of that," he said; "you who know him so much better than I, have been able to detect it more easily. Still, I would not have you build too much upon his better ways—he may continue in them, but he may break down. With an earnest friend at his side, he might succeed in life; but without a friend, he may sink back to his past estate."

"You consider that my duty lies in his direction now?"

"You must think for yourself, Miss Casey, not for him. A brother has a claim upon us to a certain extent—but we cannot have our lives, and all the actions of our lives, regulated by a brother's fantasies."

He was thinking of Richard Stewart then. I saw his brow contract, and his dark eyes seek the carpeted floor.

"I am sorry—very sorry—to hear of a difference between you and *your* brother!"

"It was of his own seeking," said Mr. Stewart, gloomily; "he, with his dreamy ideas, would have taught me what was best in a world of which he knew nothing. It was like a man full of book-lore offering his advice to one whose knowledge had been gained by practical experience."

"He was wrong, then?"

He looked up at me, then evaded my glance again.

"Time must prove that. I am working the problem now, which he would have solved after his own Utopian theory. But we are diverging to strange topics, Miss Casey," he added; "topics which I would not have dwelt upon with any other *friend*. We are still friends, I trust?"

He did not glance towards me at this question, and before I could reply thereto Mr. Mannington was with us.

"Sorry to interrupt this interesting *tête-à-tête*,"

he said, blinking at us from his half-shut eyes; "but I haven't had a chance of exchanging a word with you to-night, my dear Mark. First my daughter, then Miss Casey. See what it is to be a lady's man!"

The ladies' man smiled very faintly at the *facetiæ* of his future father-in-law, to whose company I left him. I thought better of Mr. Stewart again from that night; I forgave him his trespasses against me, his love-making and his love-breaking, for the interest he had shown in my brother's welfare. He had done his best for John —for my sake, in the first instance, I was sure of that—and I thought that the time would come when I should be his friend. He wished it; he was sorry for all the past, and the pain that he had caused me therein; he regretted that past in his heart, for my sake, and I should be able to forgive him, for his true penitence.

Mrs. Kingsworth beckoned me to her, as Bel Mannington went back to her lover's side. My mistress was looking paler and older, too, that night—the events of the day were still in her thoughts, I saw.

"You have been speaking to Mr. Stewart about your brother?"

"Yes."

"Well—what did Kingsworth leave for?"

"Mr. Stewart has not told me the reasons for John leaving his service, but he has assured me of his belief in my brother's improvement."

"Does he believe in your brother's powers of endurance?"

"With a friend at his side to keep him hopeful of the future, and strong and patient in the present."

"Emma Eaves!" said Mrs. Kingsworth, grimly.

"She might be of value to him—she professes to know him better than all his friends—she is deeply attached to him; but I was not thinking of Emma Eaves at his side in the first instance—rather of my place there."

"We will talk of your duties some other time," she said, curtly. "I am too tired to start a fresh topic to-night. I will wish Mr. Stewart *bon voyage*, and go to my room. This has been somewhat of a stormy day for you and me—thank Heaven it is over! According to proverbial phi-

losophy, we should have a calm in store for us."

She crossed to Mr. Stewart, bade him good night, wished him a safe journey, and went from the room, Mr. Mannington opening the door for her in a courteous manner, and bowing her into the corridor. A few minutes afterwards I imitated her example; I was tired and unsettled, glad of an opportunity to indulge in my old habits of reverie.

I found Emma Eaves waiting for me in my room, and was balked for awhile in my project. I was glad to see her anxious for my society again—anxious to speak of John, to detail her reminiscences concerning him, many of which spoke of a good heart, if of a too generous hand. I studied Emma that night very intently, and I thought, setting aside her impulsiveness, and taking for granted that her eavesdropping propensities were matters of the past, that she might make my brother a good wife. There was a year to wait, and I might effect much good in a year; she thought so herself; she was anxious now to submit herself to me, to strive to imitate me, to become my maid instead of Bel's. John had told her to

love me, and obey me, and she, with greater confidence, was beginning her task at once.

We were still talking when Wilthorpe church struck twelve. We paused, and counted the hours, and looked at one another in surprise.

"I had no idea it was so late," said Emma; "twelve o'clock! If John should make up his mind to go back by the mail train at two, he would be on his way by this time."

"He did not speak to me of leaving by that train."

"He is anxious to begin life for himself—to get to work again, now Mrs. Kingsworth has refused to help him. I should have told you that he said you were to forgive him if he went away in haste. But he had not made up his mind, and I hope myself to see him once more before he goes. Oh! Miss, if he grows rich suddenly—and becomes too grand for me, what shall I ever do?"

"And if he keep poor——"

"I hope he will!—just *comfortably poor*, you know, Miss Casey."

Emma and I looked at the subject in this light, and I learned that Emma was glad, for her own

sake, that Mrs. Kingsworth had refused John the loan.

"I would not have him make his fortune like that Mr. Stewart, for the world, Miss!" said Emma.

We were talking of this, and I was even laughing at this, when it struck one. What an inexhaustible subject was this John Kingsworth Casey! And how much more interesting Emma Eaves had become in my eyes since John had offered her his hand. I gave scarcely a thought to that idea of the *mésalliance* which had even "surprised" Mrs. Kingsworth.

"There, I will have no more talk, Emma, to-night," I said, springing from my chair; "get to your room and leave me to the possession of mine."

She was bidding me good night, when we both stopped with hands uplifted and looked into each other's face. A strange sharp noise like the crack of a whip arrested us.

"What's that?" whispered Emma.

Before we could arrive at a solution it was repeated.

"Some one is flinging stones against the window-

glass," I said looking in that direction; "what can it mean?"

"Jack!" cried Emma, "he has seen the light in the room, and has come to say good-bye to us."

"Too late for the train at two," I said; "one has already struck, and it is ten miles to Peterborough."

"*Then something has happened to him!*"

Filled with this sudden thought, we both dashed to the window, drew up the blind and opened the casement. A still dark night, with the sky sombre and starless, and nothing to be distinguished below as I leaned forward and peered as it were into an abyss.

"Who is there?"

"It is I—Richard Stewart," said a deep voice beneath the window.

"What—what has happened?"

"Hush!—not so loud. Who is that with you?"

"Emma Eaves."

"Come to the door alone and let me in. I must see you at once, Miss Casey."

CHAPTER VI.

"DANGER."

LIKE a thief in the night I stole out of the room, along the corridor, and down the broad stairs to the hall. Emma, with her hands crossed upon her breast, followed me, breathing short and quick with nervous agitation—my own breath seemed suspended for awhile. How the whole place, that had been hitherto so dark and noiseless, seemed to echo again with our stealthy footfalls, and the aggravating rustle of our dresses! They who slept in the rooms we passed would hear us, and open their doors to ask the meaning of our flitting there. They were all light sleepers—Mrs. Kingsworth, her brother and niece. And it was necessary—I felt already that it was necessary—to keep this coming conference a secret; that dis-

grace and ruin might overtake some one who was dear to us, if there were other watchers in the house at that hour.

Into the broad hall, the light I held in my hand casting fitful shadows on the marble pavement as we advanced to the entrance-door, barred and chained for the night.

Standing on the great hall mat with my hands upon the fastenings, my courage seemed to give way,—Emma's suddenly and strangely to revive.

"Let me open the door," said Emma, "your hand shakes too much. You will drop the bar and alarm the whole house."

In an emergency she was the stronger woman —therefore, I thought even then, the better companion for my brother John.

Emma unfastened the door, and Richard Stewart entered and closed the door immediately behind him. He looked angrily at Emma Eaves, and said,

"You can go."

"No—I shall not go," said Emma, flashing back as angry a glance at the land-bailiff; "I stay here till *you* go!"

"This is no time for squeamishness," said Richard Stewart misinterpreting her reasons; "Miss Casey, tell this girl to go to her room."

"Miss Casey will do no such thing," said Emma, defiantly, "I must hear all that has happened to her brother. Oh! Mr. Stewart," she added, suddenly softening, "you mustn't hide anything from me concerning *him*—he's the best and most generous of men, and I am his friend from whom no secrets should be kept. Ask Miss Casey, sir."

"What does she mean?" he said, turning to me.

"She will be my brother's wife in all probability, Mr. Stewart."

Richard Stewart shook his head.

"Never that!"

"He is not dead!" I screamed.

"Miss Casey, this way, please. I thought you would have been better able to stand up against bad news. No—he's not dead—he's not ill."

He crossed the hall to the library, which we entered. I followed him, and Emma brought up the rear. He made no effort to induce her to

withdraw again, but motioned her to close the door softly behind her. He walked at once to a long table in the centre of the room, and leaned against it; we two women stood before him, anxious for his revelation. A strange group in that large shadowy room, shut in by the books around us. I held the light in my hand still, and it brought into strong relief the stern, almost haggard face of Richard Stewart. In a few short hours, he had altered very much!

"I do not think that this is likely to be a secret of many hours' duration," he said; "so it matters little who is listener here. Put that light down, please—it dazzles me!"

I placed it on the table behind him at his abrupt request, and he went on very rapidly with the news he had to communicate, as if to make up for the time he had already wasted.

"Your brother has left suddenly for Glasgow; my iron safe has been opened, and money taken therefrom—money of Mrs. Kingsworth's."

"My God!"

"Mrs. Kingsworth must be woke up directly for instructions. It is necessary, I think, for me

to ride to Peterborough, and telegraph to Edinburgh and Glasgow. He may not have gone to either city—if he be as cunning as I think him, probably not. There, that's the news, Miss Casey —and you'll hate me all the days of your life for bringing it to you!"

"You suspect him at once—you lose money, and turn at once upon my brother—my brother, who, with all his faults, has been ever an honest man. Sir, I do not—I cannot believe this yet!"

"Why should he be suspected more than you?" cried Emma, now more excited than I; "you have had this money in trust, and your word is no better than his word, Richard Stewart. Send after him, you will find him innocent of all this, and Mrs. Kingsworth must look further for the thief. You have no right to come here and steal away a man's good name. Miss Bertha, don't listen to him any more!"

"*You* were always a fool!" said Richard Stewart, sharply; "you are acting foolishly in screaming out in this fashion. I knew what it would be when you came in with us."

"Mr. Stewart," I said, "you believe that my

brother took this money—oh! you are sure of it!"

"I did not see him; but he slept in the room where my safe was kept, and it was unlocked when I went down an hour ago."

"And the money taken?"

"No, not all the money—that's the oddest part of it. Two thousand pounds in Bank of England notes were taken, and one thousand, four hundred left untouched."

"*Two thousand pounds!*"

I thought of the sum my brother had begged of Mrs. Kingsworth only a few hours since, and my heart sank wofully. Had he given way?—had he, whom I had at least believed an honest man, been tempted by the knowledge of the money near him, opened the safe, and taken that which he had coveted? No common thief, whose only wish was gain, would have acted in so strange a fashion. Yet I would not let the facts sink into my heart yet. Whilst there was doubt there was hope, and my brother John had seemed so different a man, altering so rapidly for the better, only yesterday!

"I cannot believe this," I murmured; "oh! what shall I do?"

"Miss Casey, it is hard news to bring to this house—harder still to bring to you. It seems as if it were my fate to be ever crushing out your good thoughts of others. When I saw the light in your window, I thought it best to attract your attention, and ask you to communicate quietly with Mrs. Kingsworth. She may not wish this matter carried further—or you might possess influence enough to induce her to consider seriously before taking the first step. I am her servant, and await her orders. I have on my own part a proposition to make to her, by which at least this loss will not be wholly hers."

"I must wake her, then. Do you not think the morning——"

"Mrs. Kingsworth is a just woman, and may wish justice done rather than mercy," said Richard Stewart.

Seeing me draw in my breath quickly, he said—

"I am sorry to pain you—pray forgive me. Will you go to Mrs. Kingsworth now?"

I left the light burning on the table and went out of the room, Emma following me. The darkness beyond the library met us like a pall, but we knew the house well, and went across the hall to the stairs. On the stairs Emma put her arm round me in a fond caressing manner, new to her. She had a greater faith in John, and she was stronger at that time of trial than I.

"We will not believe this," she said, "you and I who know him so much better than these people. I would sooner believe that Richard Stewart has taken this money for himself. It is more likely—it is a hundred times more likely."

"Emma, it is impossible."

"He has wanted money lately—I have heard him and a stranger about here—a grey man with big whiskers—talking about money once. Miss Bertha," in a whisper, "it's a plot!"

My blood seemed to freeze at this new suggestion hissed into my ear—this horrible thought which added to my weakness, rather than gave me strength to hope for John.

"We went along the corridor in the darkness, to Mrs. Kingsworth's bed-room. Here I stopped,

and made one last effort to collect my strength. This was to be a night of trouble to me, and more than me, and I must not give way. The end might be far off, or waiting but the daylight; but I must see it to the end, and nerve myself to meet the worst.

"I am ready now," I said, after a pause and a struggle to concentrate my strength, "I can brave all now!"

I tried the door, but it was locked on the inner side. Then I tapped gently with my knuckles on the panels, and the hollow sound along the corridor seemed to echo in my heart.

My summons had scarcely been delivered, when Mrs. Kingsworth's voice, deep and resonant from within, said:

"Who is there?"

"It is I—Bertha Casey."

"Bertha Casey brings bad news, or she would not be wandering here at this time of the night. I have been expecting it—I have had dreams concerning it. Wait one instant."

We waited a short while in the corridor, then the door was opened softly, and Mrs. Kingsworth,

holding a small night-lamp in her hand, stood in the doorway, in a dark dressing-gown and shawl. Her face was pale, but it betrayed no alarm at my summons.

"Something about your brother?" she said, looking hard into my face, and holding her lamp close thereto.

"Yes, madam."

"Something against him?"

"Something that they say against him," corrected Emma from the background.

"You here too, Emma Eaves—woman of evil omen? Go to your room."

"No," was the firm reply.

Mrs. Kingsworth seemed inclined to resent this disobedience, then said:

"No matter. Stay if you will—*you* should be interested in this case. Come in."

"Richard Stewart is downstairs, Mrs. Kingsworth, and waiting to see you."

"Waiting to see me!—waiting to see me!" she repeated, and the light began to tremble in her hand.

"Madam, you will not believe all that he has

to say against my brother without fair proof?—you will not act hastily?" I said—"you will be calm!"

"I am always calm—I have outlived emotion at man's duplicity," she said; "it is for me to warn you, Miss Casey, or your ghost-like face belies your courage."

"I have courage to hope yet."

"Where is Mr. Stewart?"

"In the library."

"Tell him I will be with him in a moment. Go down quietly," she added in a whisper not free from excitement; "no noise, for your live's sake."

Emma and I went downstairs again, and found Richard Stewart in the same position, leaning against the library table with his arms folded, and his thoughtful face bent downwards. Glancing askance at that face as I advanced, I thought of Emma Eaves' suggestion and of its improbability. Never a face that told more truly its possessor's frank and honest nature.

He looked up as we entered for an instant.

"Is she coming?"

"Yes—in an instant."

We three waited silently for her approach, I standing at a little distance from the land-bailiff, Emma Eaves receding back into the deep shadow of a recess near the mantelpiece, where only a slight movement now and then told us of her presence.

A long weary watch it seemed; Mrs. Kingsworth making no haste to join us. We could hear the sepulchral ticking of a clock in some distant part of the house, as we kept our vigils there.

"She is coming," I said at last, and her slow progress down the stairs towards us was at last distinctly audible.

She came into the room, and closed the door behind her—even taking the precaution to remove the key from the outside to the inside, and turning it within the lock.

I thought that she had been dressing until she came in, in her dressing-gown and shawl, as I had seen her last. She held the night-lamp before her, and leaned upon her stick more heavily as she advanced—I was sure, more heavily!

"A very early hour for visiting, Stewart," she

said; "give me a chair, and make yourself of use, man."

He leaned across the table and reached the back of a chair, which, by a dexterous movement, he brought to the side of his mistress. She set the night-lamp by the side of my candlestick, and then dropped into the easy-chair, and turned her face away from the light.

"Now—the news?"

"Miss Casey has not told you——"

"Miss Casey has told me nothing—be brief, and spare your remarks upon the misfortune which has come to us."

"You have been robbed of two thousand pounds, madam. My iron safe has been opened, and that sum abstracted from the rest. Mr. Casey accepted my offer of a night's lodging yesterday, but left at eleven o'clock, without giving me fair notice of his change of mind."

"These the facts from which we draw our own conclusion," she said in a low tone—"well, well, I am not surprised!"

She fought hard till the last to maintain her character for equanimity, but what a fight it was!

I, who knew her best, was sure of that, despite her unwavering voice and settled attitude.

"Two thousand pounds!—it is a large sum to lose," she continued, "and there is little doubt who took that money. Miss Casey, do you guess the thief?"

"I will not try to guess it yet a while."

"You are a prudent and a just woman. We will be fair and honourable in our judgments for her sake, Mr. Stewart."

"For her sake, madam—yes," he answered.

"My money was not banked to-day at Woundell. How was that?"

"I was too late. The bank was closed when I reached Woundell this afternoon."

"*He* knew that you returned with that money?"

"Yes—he was staying with me."

"Where was your brother?"

"At the Inn. He was *not* staying with me."

"And this man Casey leaves you abruptly at eleven in the evening. What made you suspect him after that hour?"

"I do not know. A sudden suspicion led me to go downstairs, and make sure that all was right.

The first time in my life that I ever suspected evil at work in my house."

"It was presentiment," she said; "go on."

"And I found the iron safe unlocked, and two thousand pounds gone."

"Unlocked!—not broken into?"

"Unlocked, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"You and I have only keys of that safe. Has it not struck you that I might have been to the cottage in search of you, and, finding you absent, tried that safe? You were not at home all the evening."

He started, and his two hands clenched spasmodically.

"Not all the evening."

"Was the safe unlocked when you returned?"

"I did not try it. The key was in my pocket, and the safe I knew was a good one. I can swear to locking it."

"When I ordered that safe to be fixed in your cottage, as a handy receptacle for monies, with which I did not care to be worried at unseasonable hours, I did not bargain for thousands of pounds being kept therein. You, a punctual man, priding

yourself upon exactitude, were foolish enough to miscalculate your time, and reach Woundell after the bank was closed!—you returned to lead a weak man into temptation, and are not wholly free from blame."

"I calculated my time well, but was detained upon my road."

"Supposing that you had lost this money on your road, what better excuse could be invented than that of a robbery? You are a man whose word would be taken before my godson's."

"Madam!" shouted Richard Stewart.

He forgot his caution, the deference due to his mistress at her words. His face purpled for an instant with rage, and he glared at Mrs. Kingsworth with horror and astonishment.

"You think this?"

"God forbid!" she murmured, "for you are the one man on earth in whom I have learned to trust. I wouldn't lose my faith in you for all the world!"

"No, no, you don't think this—this is your way," he said; "coming hither the thought did cross me that those who knew little of me might set the blame upon me, or at least have their suspicions

that I might be the thief. That girl there thought so."

"I think so still," said Emma, who was leaning forward listening intently; "I am sure of it!"

"Silence!" said Mrs. Kingsworth hollowly, "the thief is John Kingsworth Casey, my godson—I do not spare him, let no one else in this room. Miss Casey, take the lamp and go into my study—here are my keys—this key opens *my* safe, at the bottom of which you will find the duplicate key of Mr. Stewart's safe. If there—your brother is the guilty man."

I took the lamp and hastened from the room to Mrs. Kingsworth's study. I opened the safe door and took a key therefrom which I carried to the library, and gave to Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes—it has been there five years—since the safe was made. I have had no use for it. Now, Mr. Stewart, what is to be done?"

"Stop the notes. I have all the numbers."

"That does not look like the guilty man," she said; "well, what else?"

"Telegraph for Mr. Casey's arrest, if you think of prosecuting. Telegraph to all the leading towns,

to every station, in fact, that is connected with the Great Northern and North Western lines. I will saddle horse and start at once for Peterborough."

"A merciful man this!" said Mrs. Kingsworth with a shudder.

"Madam, I came hither to ask your mercy for John Casey—to ask you to leave to me, after my own fashion, the man who has robbed us. But I see now that this would be to cast suspicion upon myself—I see already the slander creeping towards me, and sullying the good name I am very jealous of. Miss Casey," turning to me suddenly and eagerly, "you will give me leave to be just instead of merciful."

"I can say nothing. If my brother John has taken this money he deserves no mercy, and—and I will not sue for it. But, oh! Mrs. Kingsworth, I have a hope yet that he can explain this mystery."

"Two thousand pounds," murmured Mrs. Kingsworth, "the sum he asked for this afternoon. Well—let him have it!"

Two out of the three listeners turned to her at

once. She looked from Richard Stewart to me defiantly, and then rose from her chair to close the interview.

"Let him have this money. I will not stir one step to regain it. Let him go his way with these ill-gotten gains and prosper, as some bad men have done before him, despite the laws moral and divine they break. Mr. Stewart," she said proudly and sternly, "I will have no interference with my rights; this man is my godson, and bears a name which I ask you to respect. We have all done with him—let him sink away in the endless night which must engulph him; I am an old woman powerless to act—too proud to act—and too indifferent to the value of the gold he has stolen from me to resent the injury. I am powerless, sir—powerless!" she added with strange reiteration.

"Madam, this is my loss. By this act you fling the whole loss on me, and offer no chance of my retrieving it," said Richard Stewart; "you render me your debtor to the extent of two thousand pounds—too large a sum for me to make up yet awhile."

"Have I asked you for a penny?"

"You make this story by your silence hard to prove in my favour."

"This story we consign to the grave, and on the gravestone we will inscribe—'Sacred to the memory of an awful theft!'—I am the only mourner there."

"I owe you two thousand pounds," said Richard Stewart.

"You owe me nothing. Go home, and take my curse with you!"

She flung her arms forward as she spoke, and the loose sleeve dropped away from the long gaunt limb. In that attitude, with that wild expression on her face, she looked weird-like and prophetic. Even Richard Stewart winced at her denunciation.

"Your curse, Mrs. Kingsworth!" he said; "surely I have not deserved it."

"You have brought me anxiety and grief. You have dashed down the one faint hope that has lasted until now, and left me in the darkness. But—I will not curse you. You are only the evil messenger whom God has sent to mortify me in my miserable old age. Go!"

He went at once from the room, rapidly and silently. We followed him to the outer door, where he waited till we reached him.

"I shall leave the rest of this mystery to Miss Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth more composedly; "I rely on your good faith, sir."

"I will respect your wish, at any cost to me," he answered.

He went out into the cold black landscape beyond the Hall, and Mrs. Kingsworth stood looking after him, till I warned her that there was danger to her health in lingering there.

She turned at last—a strange woman, whom I had never seen before, and tightly grasped my arm.

"Take me up-stairs—I am very ill!" she whispered.

CHAPTER VII.

BROKEN DOWN.

THERE were other wanderers about the house—people who could not sleep, or who had been disturbed from sleep by us, despite the caution we had used. On the first landing, as we toiled upstairs with our new grief—to us three women no greater grief could have come—Mr. Mannington met us.

His face was white, and his hair rough and tangled, as though he had just awakened; but I noticed then, and I remembered afterwards, that he wore the dress in which I had seen him last at dinner. Possibly he had been up all night, restless and nervous himself; part of the Mannington eccentricity was his inheritance.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked; "who's that left the house just now?"

"I'm not well," murmured Mrs. Kingsworth—"can't you see that?"

Her illness offered an opportune excuse, and Mr. Mannington, to my surprise, did not press his inquiries. He was satisfied with them, or his thoughts were suddenly directed into a new channel by the wild and seared face advancing to him.

"Bless me, you *are* ill, Charlotte! Shall I send for a doctor?—shall I go for anyone, or anything? Shall I wake Isabel?"

"You can go to your room and lock yourself in," said Mrs. Kingsworth, with a flash of her old acerbity—"that is all that I require of you yet a while."

"But I think a doctor——"

"I will have a doctor later in the day if I want one," said Mrs. Kingsworth feebly; "I shall not die in a hurry. I have too much to think about. I am strong and hearty yet!"

"If she's any worse you will call me, Miss Casey," he said, unnecessarily loud, and then withdrew to his own room.

At the door of Mrs. Kingsworth's room, my mistress motioned Emma to approach.

"What do you think of all this, girl? Your opinion should be worth something."

"Madam, he never took the money."

"The worst man can find a champion in a woman—you are a child of great faith."

"I know him best of all—there is not one, not his own sister, who understands him."

"In the morning will you come to my room? I have much to say to you—remember."

Emma Eaves made a gesture of assent, and then went slowly and thoughtfully along the corridor, leaving Mrs. Kingsworth and me together. When she had reached the extremity, and disappeared, Mrs. Kingsworth turned to me.

"In the morning I should like to see you again. At an early hour, no matter how early, I shall be waiting for you."

"Madam, I cannot leave you to-night. You are unwell, unlike yourself—you may want assistance."

"It is easily obtained if I require it," she said; "I could rouse all Wilthorpe with the alarm-bell for that matter. I shall want no one to-night—I am much stronger than I was a moment since—I wish to be alone."

She took her hand from my arm, and stood erect before me, as though to assert her strength. Her face of sorrow, disappointment, or whatever it was, was very sad to gaze on still.

"Give me my lamp, Miss Casey, and leave me to myself," she said; "has Emma the other light? —we should be careful with the lights in a dry old house like this."

"Emma has the light."

She spoke again of the precaution necessary, and of the carelessness of servants, as though to prove to me how cool and self-possessed she was. But it was a poor struggle, and deceived no one.

"Madam, I will ask you as a favour to let me sit with you to-night. This news has unnerved you."

"If you be strong enough to resist such news and bear such disgrace as has fallen on you to-night, why should I not take things philosophically? Miss Casey," she said very firmly, "if you have any respect for me—which I doubt—go to your room!"

I could urge my request no further, and yet I lingered. The remembrance of her efforts to ascend the stairs, the consciousness of her changed looks,

—intense, full of eagerness and life as they were—warned me of danger; I felt that my duty was at her side, protecting and solacing her. Her pride, that despised all help, and held her aloof from human sympathy, did not restrain me, and when she had passed into her room, I remained where she had left me, spell-bound and expectant. Her trouble seemed before mine—my own mother in trouble had never distressed my girlhood more.

She left me in the darkness of that corridor—the door of her room ajar, and one faint streak of light stealing across the landing-place. I stood there a still and patient sentinel, knowing by instinct that I should be wanted presently. The stillness within the room seemed even more apparent—if I may use the word—than without. It alarmed me more, for it suggested more thoughts of danger.

What could she be doing? Had she passed into the room and then stood motionless, a figure stone-stricken?—had she fallen asleep?—was she dead? The silence was unearthly; it had followed so quickly upon her departure from me;

not the rustle of a dress, a sigh of regret, the faintest movement broke upon the stillness. My noisy throbbing heart seemed the only living thing within twenty paces of me—downstairs the clock was ticking, but it belonged to another world and I was listening for signs from this.

I never knew how long I waited there; minutes and hours are of equal length when one's heart is in suspense. I had not a thought of abandoning that position until I was assured that she was at rest, and required no help—until some sign was made for good or evil from that room. It came at last with a long quivering cry, suppressed at first as though she had been conscious of my watch, and then increasing in intensity till it rang through the house like a death-wail. My heart stood still a moment with the horror for which I had thought myself prepared, and then I ran into the room with arms outstretched, to fold that woman to my bosom, and try to comfort her.

My deep love and pity were strong enough to comfort one whose actions had been incomprehensible to me. She had been standing a few paces from me all this while, rigid and statuesque as my-

self, and the re-action had come at last and broken down restraint. She had fallen forwards towards the bed-side at last, with her arms spread in advance across the coverlet, and the night-lamp and stick still in her hands—the flame of the former licking at the heavy drapery of the bed.

I snatched the lamp away and set it aside on the marble wash-stand, without her knowledge or her heed of my presence. I knelt beside her and passed my arm round her withered neck, to assure her that I was there whilst she continued that long, tremulous wail of despair.

"Madam—madam—will you let me help you—stay with you? Are you worse than I fear?"

She continued to moan, and disregard me. I made a movement as though to rise, for I was becoming afraid of this prostration, and anxious for medical assistance, when the hand that had held the lamp caught mine.

"Don't go yet," she cried; "this will—pass—away! Oh! for some one in the world to trust!"

"Madam, trust in me," I said; "trust in one to love you, help you, comfort you, be the friend to

you in your distress that you have been to me and mine."

"No, no, no. Not you, of all the world!"

"Think what you have been to me—you my dead mother's friend—you whose real nature I have seen, through the veil that you would have cast over it—you whom I have learned to love as a daughter—to feel towards you as a daughter anxious to tell all my troubles to, and hear all yours."

"Then you would hate me?"

"No."

"Woman, you must hate me!" she said, raising her head for a moment, and then burying it once more in the bed-clothes; "would you have more mercy than I on my misdeeds—I who hate myself. Judge me, my God, if this be true or not!"

"Trust in your old friend's daughter, as you might have trusted in your own. Oh! madam, I feel that I can be of help to you."

"After all my years of struggling I have broken down at last. I am a weak old woman, to whom retribution has come—I—I only wish to die! Bertha," she said, suddenly—it was the first time that she had addressed me thus—"I *will* trust you; and

if you will try not to hate me afterwards, if you will tell me what is best, and teach me—ignorant as a child—what can be best in this humiliation, I will thank God for the day I ever saw you! Closer to me, and let me whisper in your ear a secret that I thought would last my life out. That man who robbed me is—my SON!"

"My brother John?"

"Not your brother—having no claim upon you—bound to you by no tie of relationship whatever. Thank heaven for that mercy in this day of shame to me!"

"I am in a dream!"

"See to the door—there may be listeners—lock the door, and come back to me."

I went to the door, looked out on the dark landing, turned the key in the lock, and returned. She was kneeling still, her face still buried in the coverlet, her arms outspread before her. I knelt beside her again, and passed my arm once more round this stricken woman.

"You do not shrink away—you will not hate me after this?"

"Ever your friend, madam—ever one to take

your part, and fight your battles—loving you to the last. Oh! madam, I have wanted one to love and help so much!"

"God bless you!"

She was silent for a long while; I asked her at length if she would defer that confession which was on her lips, till she was stronger, better.

"No; I will tell you now," she said—"I may have no other chance. I am a woman giving up all old resolves, and the new life or strength is not for me. I grew old before my time, and the long struggle to keep firm has worn me out. I do not complain—I shall be happier in my coffin than ever I have been in life. From a girl of your age till now, that life has been a tragedy!"

"It may brighten yet, God willing."

"Never. Listen, and judge if that be possible."

She spoke in a low tone, but every word was clear and precise, deepening at times with the agitation of the speaker, and only faltering at the last.

"I married late in life; I was a woman who had been enriched by more than one legacy, and they who scent money, as vultures scent the dead, did

their best to make a prize of me. One succeeded, despite all my caution, all that knowledge of the world, in which I had already begun to pride myself. He was a rich man also, owner of this estate at Wilthorpe, and I could not understand a wealthy man burdening his life with a woman he loved not for herself. That character had not crossed my path, and so he tricked me into marriage. That is the preface."

"Well?" I asked, breathlessly.

"It was the most unhappy marriage upon earth. We both hated each other; we had no consideration for each other; we did our worst at last to cross each other's wishes in every way that lay in our power. We were both afflicted with a devilish pride that hurled us apart with greater strength whenever friends would have made peace between us. Before two years of my marriage had expired, I, a watchful, jealous woman, found that he was utterly false to me—that in a gay house in London was hidden the woman who had all his smiles and love. What would you have done?"

"Denounced him!" I ejaculated.

"I was a dishonest, crafty woman, and kept

quiet," she said; "I wanted revenge, and I studied it, and waited for it. When I knew that his greatest wish in life was for an heir to his estate and name, and when the truth forced itself upon me that I was likely to gratify that wish, that revenge was in my power. Ah! you start now at me—the truth is dawning on you, and you shrink away."

"No, madam—I pity you. I see the struggle coming between this revenge and love."

"It was a struggle between my good and evil angels, and the good one died," she continued. "I resolved to keep my secret from him; he was absent from the Hall for months together with his mistress; he travelled with her on the Continent, caring nothing for me, never writing to me, never for one instant burdening his conscience with one merciful thought of his poor wife. Some people," she said more excitedly, "called me his mad wife, and that alarmed him, for in my family had happened strange occurences. I might have been mad in my desertion—mad to think of a revenge which stabbed me more deeply than himself, and yet from which I never swerved. I left the Hall,

and came to London ; the child was born in your mother's house—she and your father were my only confidantes; your father was a spendthrift, and money gained his confidence and bought his secresy. I thought that I could exult in my child at all times and seasons, and keep my husband in ignorance of his birth ; it was my madness, perhaps, that concealed ever the truth from him. When he came back once more to the Hall, I met him in the loneliness of this great house, and held my peace. He came back a hardened villain, who had grown as tired of the woman he had beguiled as he had done of me ; he settled down at the Hall, an irritable morose man, who would have ruled me, as he ruled his servants, with a rod of iron. He never left Wilthorpe again ; he bound me to Wilthorpe, away from my boy, and he kept his own happiness back by his ill-treatment of me. His one theme was my money; it had been settled on me by my father, and I refused my signature to any deed which conveyed it to my covetous husband. He fawned for it, cursed me for it, and we went on, year after year, increasing in our hate, having our separate rooms and separate servants, and only once or

twice a year in society, presenting a fair appearance to the world. Thus for fifteen years, during which I never saw my child, and only heard concerning him from your mother; and then that man died suddenly in his library chair, with no one to pity him, or mourn for him. Thus he left me free."

"And then you did not claim your son?"

"Then I had altered very much—I was an aged and hardened woman, whom the devil had steeled against all love and sympathy. My pride exulted in my superiority to human weakness; I tried as hard to become a heartless woman, as earnest people strive for goodness sometimes. But I went in search of my son once more—your father had died then, and your mother was a housekeeper—you were nine years of age. At fifteen years of age my son had thrown himself upon the streets, I had heard, become a reckless youth, careless of home and home-ties—had already tried to the uttermost the heart of one who had learned to love him as her child. I did not see my son, I was heart-sick with disappointment; my morbid fears saw my old life over again, with a man who would

know no gratitude for his position, or ever entertain one spark of love towards me. I went away hard and cold, content to wait for better times in him, and finding that year after year he grew more callous. My pride held him ever from my arms; I tried to teach myself to hate him like his father, so that my desolation should sit more easily upon me. So year after year, until now—when the truth faces me of what is, and my wrung soul assures me of what might have been!"

"Madam, it is not too late——"

"Too late for everything! Too late even to see him, and ask pardon for the wrong I have done him—too late to make atonement! All before me impenetrable and vague, and the door of fate barred in my face as mercilessly as the gates of heaven!"

She began to moan again, and I to whisper in her ear of the better life that might be hers —of the better days even on earth which might fall to her share. For the past in which she had played so strange a part there might be reparation yet. Would she only pray for pardon, and trust in Him who ordereth all things rightly?

"No—no," she said, shaking her head passionately to and fro, "there is no mercy for *me!* I have worked evil to others as well as to myself—I have more than my own soul to answer for—my son is a robber!"

"We have no proof yet," I cried; "we *may* hope!"

"I could have saved him from the devil years ago, and my pride would not allow it—I was content to fling my money at him, to watch him whenever the chance was offered me—my God! to watch him sinking step by step away from right, and never stirring hand or foot to save him! When he was a baby, and my mother's heart yearned for him, I placed him in the hands of a weak woman and an unprincipled man—your parents—and he grew up ill-trained and dissolute. I set my brother's child before my own, and went on sowing seeds of evil in my path of life—and now, the harvest, oh! the deadly harvest!"

"Madam, you must rest now—you have suffered too much to-night—will you lie down now, and let me watch here till the morning?"

"If you like."

She gave assent in a weak voice. Had I done right in listening so long, in making no effort to restrain her sad confession, in allowing her to pour forth this story, after my knowledge of how the night's news had struck her down? I had been eager and curious, and my own interest had carried me along, absorbing my prudence until then. Then my heart accused me!

When she was in her bed she stretched out her wasted hand to me, saying:

"You do not hate me, then?"

"No, madam. I see your desperate conflict through life—that firm resolve to keep this secret, struggling with the mother's love which never lessened, which accounts for much that has been so long a mystery to me!"

"You are a good young woman—your life should be a happy one. I wish it were in my power to make it so."

"We must leave that to God."

"Strange it seems to lie here and trust in you. Years ago I loved your mother for her gentleness and faithfulness—now the daughter at my side as gentle, faithful, and more strong!"

I thought that she had fallen asleep after this, she closed her eyes and lay so still.

"Bertha," she said, suddenly, and startled me, "are you there?"

"Here, madam, at your side."

"Ah! yes—my head was wandering somewhat, and I had gone back many years before your time. Bertha," in an excited whisper, "I must see this man!"

"Your son?" I exclaimed.

"My guilty son—yes, I must see him! Perhaps this one last effort—this one first effort—to turn him from his evil ways may work some good, coming from his mother."

"We will think to-morrow if it be possible to find him."

"We will sally forth to-morrow in search of him. You and I together."

"You are faint, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"A little faint—it will pass away presently—give me some water."

I filled a glass with water, and held it to her lips. When she had drunk she lay back and closed her eyes.

"Don't speak any more now. Try and sleep here by my side. If I am restless in my sleep, wake me. I must not live this night over again, even in my dreams."

She fell off to sleep at last, and I sat by her bedside, thinking how much more lined her face had become, and how a few hours had altered it. So I kept my watch there till the grey light began to show behind the window-blind, and the birds to twitter in their nests without. Looking at that wan face, so ghastly in the day-dawn, I prayed that she might live to see her son once more, and doubted as I prayed!

CHAPTER VIII.

BOUND NORTH.

MRS. KINGSWORTH'S first words on awakening were methodical and commandatory.

"Draw up the blind, and—send for a doctor."

"You do not feel worse?" I asked, bending over her.

"No—better. But I am very weak, and the doctor must do his best to make me strong again. If he fail, so much the worse for me!"

She was looking very ill. When I drew the blind up at her request, I saw how greatly she had changed, and feared the worst.

"Bertha," she said, "say nothing of all that I have told you, yet awhile. There will be time enough to act, I hope. With time left me, what

may not ensue. There, send the groom for Dr. Edmonds, of Woundell, and then lie down and rest. *You* must hold firm."

Later in the day, after Dr. Edmonds had seen her and reported favourably, she gave way more. Bel Mannington had been sitting at her bedside, striving her best to amuse her by a recapitulation of all the kind words that Mr. Stewart had said to her, and all the talk that she had had with Mr. Stewart—matters that pleased Bel, and made her heart light, but which had no interest for Mrs. Kingsworth—when my mistress started up in bed, and bade her fetch me on the instant.

She had been brooding on the great question which kept her brain disturbed, paying no heed to her niece's conversation, and her sudden animation scared the girl from her rhapsody.

"Aunt wants to see you, Bertie," she said. "Oh! what is the matter?—what has happened to change the house like this!"

I went to Mrs. Kingsworth's room, where I found my mistress with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes.

"Stay without, Bel," she said, "I wish to speak

with Miss Casey alone. Bertha," turning to me before the door had scarcely closed, "I shall die here, I am sure of it."

"Pray do not entertain those fears, madam. This is the natural result of a night's excitement, and will pass away."

"I have no fear of death," she said, with her old scornful look; "life has not been so happy with me that I should care to lose it. But I have an awful fear of dying without seeing *him*—a keen regret that you and I cannot undertake that journey we spoke of hours ago. Bertha, you profess to love and pity an old woman—will you do her a great service?"

"Any service she wishes."

"Start at once for Scotland, and try and find the man you have called your brother."

"Madam, gladly!"

I sprang to my feet; the desire for action had been strong upon me all day. When I had attempted rest for a short while in my room, the desire to be stirring, to promote her wish and mine, had kept me restless. There might be little chance of finding him—slight probability of a clue to

his discovery, but sitting there was worse than death to John.

"Bend your head down," she whispered, "we have plenty of listeners in this house, and must proceed with caution. They must spread no evil report about my son. Let him have one more fair chance in life. I have been planning your course the last three hours—I who have planned so badly for myself and all connected with me!" she added with a sigh.

"We shall be more fortunate this time," I said cheerfully.

"Do you think so?" she asked, catching at my assuring words, and looking the brighter for them. This confidence in others, and want of reliance in herself, was singular to witness in a woman who had lived so long alone.

"I will do my best, and leave no stone unturned, madam."

"I am sure of it," she said, "and I will live on hope till you come back again. This is my plan. Seek Richard Stewart at once, and ask him about Kingsworth—everything that Kingsworth said and did whilst he was staying at his house.

If *he* should not be guilty—if he should have had no thought of guilt till the last moment," she added, with a sigh that went to my heart, "and then have fallen into temptation, he may have left a clue by which to find him. He never inherited his mother or father's cunning, poor fellow—and he will have left a clue—Richard Stewart has a clue to find him—I saw it in his face last night! Thence from Stewart's cottage to Peterborough—my carriage shall take you thither. From Peterborough to Edinburgh, where you will find Mr. Stewart in High Street."

"Why, Mr. Stewart?"

"Mr. Stewart left for Edinburgh by the two A.M. train—they may have met at Peterborough. Mr. Stewart may afford valuable information as to the whereabouts of Kingsworth. I rely much on Mr. Stewart—tell him that you are anxious concerning your brother, and wish very much to find him."

"Yes."

"Should all prove futile," she continued, speaking in feverish haste, and with one hand picking at the counterpane—I remembered my mother's

saying that sick people who fidgeted thus would surely die!—"go to Glasgow, and seek him for yourself by any means in your power. Meanwhile he may write to you; if not, and you be unsuccessful, and hear nothing from me, come back in a week. I will live till your return."

"Oh! madam!"

"I promise it," she went on, more wildly, "I will not die like this, in the uncertainty oppressing me. God will be merciful and let me live till he comes back, or you come to tell me what he is! If—if you find him, tell him all at once. Ask him, for his mother's sake—remember, his mother's!—to come on at any expense, and in all haste to me. Twice a day telegraph from Scotland. Now, go at once. Go to the hotel, and mention my name; they will remember it. In my study safe you will find a hundred pounds in notes and gold—take them."

I hesitated, but she made an impatient gesture with both hands, and I thought it best not to reason with her. She was anxious to see me depart upon my journey; and every minute that I lingered there was dangerous to her peace.

"When you return, all in this house will have heard of the existence of a son; if—if I *should* die and never see you again, keep the secret of that money's loss with Richard Stewart and Emma Eaves, for my sake. Tell Stewart that it is my wish, and that honest servant will respect it. Let me see you again when you are ready to go. There are my keys on the dressing-table—and now send Emma Eaves to me."

"You wish to see her?" I said doubtfully.

"Yes—I wish to make a friend of her, if I can."

I went out of the room to my own, and made hasty preparations for departure. I was excited and feverish—unwilling at one moment to leave that lone woman there with so many unappreciative minds; and then in another instant fretful at all the hindrances to my departure rising in my path. Emma found her way to my room, and looked on, amazed at my preparations—heard with greater amazement still the story of my journey.

"I will go with you!" she cried impetuously; "I can't stay here!"

"Till my return, for the sake of him and me, I hope you will."

"I shall never see him again; and you are all against him, except me."

"He will come back with me, if I can find him, Emma. Mrs. Kingsworth is anxious to see him, and be his friend still. That money, spirited away no matter by whom, you and I and Mr. Stewart are never to mention again. You will stay, take my place, and be Mrs. Kingsworth's friend, if she need one."

"She can never be my friend!"

"She will, I think. She has been Kingsworth's and mine. You will learn to love her before I return."

"I will stay. I will wait here till John comes to prove his innocence. You don't doubt him now?"

"I hope, Emma. I remember what great temptations he has had in life, and how he has resisted them. No, I do *not* believe it!" I exclaimed.

It was the impulse of the moment; and then the crushing truth came back that he had asked for

two thousand pounds of Mrs. Kingsworth, had been refused that sum, and gone away disheartened at his future—gone away, I thought, to Richard Stewart's house, from which two thousand pounds were afterwards abstracted! I did not retract my last words, but I bent my head over a small portmanteau that I had hastily packed, to hide my face from the woman who would hear no harm of him. I sent her away to Mrs. Kingsworth's room, and went downstairs to the study, where the safe was. I unlocked the safe, and was taking the money therefrom, when Mr. Manning-ton skipped into the room.

"What are you doing there, Miss Casey?" he asked, somewhat sharply.

"Obeying Mrs. Kingsworth's wishes, sir," I quietly replied.

"Mrs. Kingsworth might have asked me to supply you with money, if you had wanted any. Be careful with the keys, Miss Casey—we can't be too careful in times like these. Give them into Mrs. Kingsworth's hands or mine."

"I will do so, sir."

"Mrs. Kingsworth has just sent down orders for

the carriage to take you up at Mr. Stewart's in an hour's time. Are you going to Woundell again? —is my sister worse?"

"She is not worse, I hope, Mr. Mannington. She will tell you the reasons for my departure."

"Perhaps I can guess them," he said.

I did not look up—I knew what expression was on his face—I feared he knew too much of the secret I had been enjoined to keep. I locked the safe, and went from the room without another word—he and I were scarcely friends now; and that night I dreaded him. I was in Mrs. Kingsworth's room soon afterwards, and my mistress gave a sigh of relief as I came in, cloaked and bonneted for my journey, and put her keys back in their place.

"You are ready, then?"

"Yes—quite ready now."

"Emma is already here as nurse, you see," she said with a faint smile.

I looked at Emma, whose eyes were red and swollen, as though she had been crying.

"She will be of infinite service to me," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "this girl will be a new friend

soon. How the friends are gathering round me in the latter days!—that is a good augury."

"Where is Isabel?" I asked of Emma.

"Asleep on her bed," said Emma.

"Poor girl!—easily tired by new duties. I shall kill her in a week with my fretfulness," Mrs. Kingsworth said. "Do not wake her—let her rest awhile—delay not any longer," she added irritably.

"Remember me to her, then; tell her it is your wish that I leave thus, or she will never forgive me."

"I will tell her. Now, good-bye."

She stretched out her hand to me, and I took it in my own, and leaned over her to kiss her.

"You will do your best for me?" she pleaded.

"My very best."

She sighed heavily beneath my kiss. Poor proud lady, who had hewn out her own misfortunes, I knew what thoughts were passing through her brain, so troubled still! Ever before her, her loneliness—the consciousness of the opportunities she had wasted, and the ties that she had sundered by her wilfulness.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye!"

She called me back to reiterate the major portion of her past instructions, speaking with that rapidity more characteristic of the new manner than the old. I heard all and departed, wondering if I should look upon her ever again, and praying that I might bring her good news—if even at the last, bring back Kingsworth, to call her mother for the first time in his life.

I hurried away then; Mr. Mannington shook hands with me in the hall, and wished me a pleasant journey, wherever it was, in quite a frank and cordial manner—then I went down the drive on foot towards the house of Richard Stewart. I perplexed myself as to the better course to pursue supposing Richard Stewart were from home, and in what way I should word the hasty letter to be left with the old housekeeper till his return—taking for granted that the woman who charred for the land-bailiff had not gone back to the village. The charwoman gone, and Richard Stewart absent, what then?

Harassing myself with these surmises—people

will harass themselves unnecessarily at times—I reached the gate and looked eagerly across the road towards the cottage. He was out. There was no steady light within the cottage parlour, only the uncertain flicker of the fire, which had been banked up and left till his return. The house was deserted, then, and I must proceed to the village in search of him, or go on my way without him.

I went up the path, however, and knocked at the door. I would not lose one faint chance of seeing him. To my surprise I heard his footsteps crossing the room, and immediately afterwards the door opened, and I could see the outline of his figure against the fitful firelight within.

"Miss Casey," he said in a hollow voice, "what brings you hither at this time of night?"

"Business of importance—may I come in?"

"If you don't mind people talking about you in the village—this village full of lying and slandering—yes."

"I am not afraid."

"Stay, then, I will get a light."

He had been sitting in the dark; planted in front of the fire was the chair he had recently

vacated. For a man who valued time, and professed never to have wasted it, it was a strange position. But all things were strange and new in Wilthorpe—and that little world of mine was changing rapidly.

He lighted his table-lamp, and I entered the parlour. The iron safe in the wall seemed to lean towards me ominously. He noted my glance towards it.

"Ay, it's an ugly ornament, that will ever be a reproof to me," he said. "Well, has Mrs. Kingsworth changed her mind?"

"Mrs. Kingsworth is very ill."

"I am sorry to hear it. The loss of the money is troubling her."

"Or the manner of its loss—yes."

"How must it trouble me, then, left in trust of it," he said impetuously; "and what share of blame will fall to me when Wilthorpe has heard the story?"

"Wilthorpe knows Richard Stewart."

"Wilthorpe is like other worlds, large and sterner in their character—it will believe in the shadow of a proof, and in the worst of any man."

"It is an unjust world, then, and need not trouble the few honest people in it."

"Miss Casey, I have been brooding before that fire—heaven knows how long!—taking the place of Wilthorpe, and passing judgment on a land-bailiff. I have examined all the evidence carefully; sifted, weighed, and made allowance for extenuating circumstances; heard all the witnesses before and against; asked the prisoner for his defence, and listened to a rambling statement of how he went to bank the money, was detained by a circumstance which he refuses to explain, because if explained it would make him look more guilty, reached Woundell bank too late, returned and locked up the money, found in the night the safe unlocked and two thousand pounds abstracted from a larger sum. I put on the black cap for that man, and say: 'If there be a law in England to hang a man for an ungrateful theft—hang that fellow high as Haman!'"

He spoke with fierceness and energy—the result of his long brooding on the subject. He saw himself suspected, the guilty thief rejoicing in the spoil, and his heart was full of bitterness.

"You have no doubt of my brother's duplicity?"

"No doubt of it."

"I am going in search of him—going at once to Scotland, to beg him to tell us all that he knows of this case, and to return with me to Mrs. Kingsworth's house."

"He is her god-son," he said; "she would screen him at the cost of my honour."

"Your honour is safe, I am sure," I answered; "the story is not known yet——"

"Known to Mrs. Kingsworth, yourself, and a lady's-maid, to begin with," he said, abruptly. "Well, you are going to Scotland on a profitless errand; what do you want with me?"

"To ask you to tell me all that my brother said concerning his future course—his plans."

"All that was said was to throw me off my guard."

"I will not believe it yet awhile."

"You are his sister—you would no more believe that he had acted dishonestly, than I would believe that Mark had. Well, that is natural and right; but surely it is folly to proceed North in search of your brother."

"Will you tell me?"

"He was going to Edinburgh, he said, to his old lodgings for his luggage. Thence to Glasgow, where a clerkship awaited him."

"To Edinburgh!—what address?"

"He did not say."

"Your brother would know John's late address?"

"Yes."

"I must go thither in the first instance—Mrs. Kingsworth was right."

"You had better go to London."

"No, I hope not," I replied; "did he say anything before this?"

"Oh! he was full of confidence, boasting of the different man that he had become, and of the chances of a fortune that a little capital would offer him. In the old style—looking forward sanguinely, till he came back from the Hall, saddened somewhat at his godmother's refusal to assist him, but cheered by some new resolutions, by the way, which his fertile brain had conceived. He would be content with a clerkship that had been offered to him before he left Edinburgh—he would marry and settle down for good, and be satisfied with

his lower position in society. But all this—"

"All this was not acting, Mr. Stewart," I said in this place; "all that he said, I believe that he intended. If he took this money—spare me the hope that all may be explained yet!—if he took it, it was in a sudden moment of temptation, finding money to his hand, and the tempter whispering in his ear."

"This must be a great trouble to you," he said. "You must feel this more than any of us. You are a woman unaccustomed to think ill of your fellow-men—attributing the best motives to acts the most unworthy. You have had faith in a brother, and lost it—well, that's hard!"

I thought of his own brother, but the subject was foreign to my mission, and the carriage was on its way towards me. I could hear the roll of the wheels and the clatter of the horses' hoofs approaching.

"This is a long journey," he added, "for a young woman to make alone to a strange city. You will go to a principal hotel at once, thence to Mark's house. Ask Mark to give you information as to the best place for you to stay at, whatever part of

Scotland this wild-goose chase may lead you. Is there anything that I can do?"

"Nothing more, thank you."

"Here is a list of the missing notes—is it worth anything?"

"I think not—I will take it, if you like."

"It may be of service—put it in your purse."

The carriage stopped before the cottage fence, and the coachman left his horses to run up the path to apprise me that he was ready.

"I don't like this journey," said Richard Stewart, peevishly; "it answers no end, and you had no right to go. Why does Mrs. Kingsworth send a woman on such a quest as this? I was wronged—this should have been my task."

"She is anxious to see her—godson. Under any circumstances his presence at the Hall is needed very much."

"I don't like this fashion of going to work. You should have stayed at home."

"Good-bye."

He shook my hand, but did not respond to my adieu; he closed the door after him, and went along the path with me, his Scotch cap on his head.

He assisted me into the carriage, and shut me rather unceremoniously within; then the door was slammed upon me, and the carriage driven away from Wilthorpe.

Should I return with John? I thought—how should I return? and what would await my coming in the great mansion where so much had happened to affect my life?

It was a long, dreary ride to Peterborough; the night was cold, and the keen air stole into the carriage and chilled me. It was the same carriage which had taken Mrs. Kingsworth and me to the Woundell ball. I was unhappy then, and yet how far away seemed all those thoughts which had lain at my heart in that time? And yet only a few weeks ago!

At Peterborough Station at last, and to my astonishment Richard Stewart opening the door and assisting me to alight.

"I will see you start on your journey, Miss Casey. If you had given me an hour's notice, I would have come North with you. They had no right to send you alone like this. They have no consideration!"

"I am in no danger, Mr. Stewart."

He went on with his reproofs. It was the one refrain with which all his conversation ended.

"No; but they should have sent me—you are young, and know nothing of the North. You are not fit to be made a catspaw of in this fashion. I shall tell Mrs. Kingsworth so."

"I am the right woman in the right place, Mr. Stewart," I said, unable to suppress a smile at his vehemence.

"I don't know that."

Richard Stewart saw me into a waiting-room, and made inquiries concerning the next train. There was one due in half an hour, and he spent the intermediate time in walking in and out of the waiting-room, to make sure that I had not escaped him. He had given orders that Mrs. Kingsworth's carriage should wait for his return, and he was of sufficient importance to be attended to. Before the half hour had expired, he had procured me a ticket, and found a place for me in a first-class carriage of the train that had arrived from London, and was taking fifteen minutes' rest. He chose a carriage already occupied by two ladies and two

gentlemen, and stood at the door talking to me through the open window.

"One compartment is reserved for ladies travelling alone, but it is full, and the guard is too independent to find another. I'll report the beggar before I leave here."

"This will do very well, thank you, Mr. Stewart."

"There'll be room at the next station, I'm told," said he; "I would get in then if I were you."

"We are going as far as Edinburgh, sir," said the lady facing me.

Richard Stewart nodded his head familiarly at her in return.

"Oh! thank you—that will do, then. They had no business to send you this long journey alone, mind you," he added, for about the twentieth time; "it can't end in any good. If you had only had that wild girl Eaves with you, it would have been better than starting off like this. Good-bye."

He shook hands with me again, and the last reminiscence of Peterborough was Richard Stewart's anxious face upon the platform, watching the train move upon its way.

CHAPTER IX.

IN EDINBURGH.

WHEN the train was rattling along upon its journey, I composed myself for thought. There was little to interest me in the four occupants of my carriage, had I been disposed for conversation or observation. The whole four fell asleep almost immediately after the train had started—the ladies with their heads on one side, and their bonnets crushed against the back cushions; the gentlemen with their hands in their pockets, and their hats tilted forwards on the bridge of the nose.

Ladies in furs and railway-rugs, thorough travellers, habituated to long journeys; gentlemen comfortably wrapped in rugs also, one a very stout man, the other thin, cadaverous, and lank, who

writhed in his sleep, as though dreaming of the rack and thumb-screw. One glance at these four sleepers, and then I went back to the events of the day—that long, long day, beginning from one A.M., and not ended till I was many miles upon my journey, embracing within it much of mystery, suspicion, and fear, and altering all the future! There was much to think of, and I submerged myself into the deep well of my meditations, and forgot the outer world. I played my part over again with Emma Eaves; I heard the sharp crack of the pebble against my window-glass, that first signal of distress beyond my little room; I stole down to admit Richard Stewart into the house; I woke up Mrs. Kingsworth, and noted how the impression came to her; I was in the library listening to the story; I was watching on the dark landing, and rushing into Mrs. Kingsworth's room when she gave way again. Then the confession of the stricken woman, and that inner life bared at which I had never guessed. Thinking of all these things at once, and trying in their midst to piece my future projects with them, till my head felt heavy with my weight of thought.

The stout man woke up suddenly, and with litt ceremony began to remove the long legs of h *vis-à-vis* from their encroachment on his spac The thin man opened his eyes and blinked at h companion.

"The lion's share of everything, upon my soul said the stout man; "what a man you are!"

"What! have you not got over it yet?" said t thin man, breaking into a rusty, cackling laug that frightened the next lady's eyes open for fleeting instant.

"No, I haven't," was the surly answer.

"But yours was a Scotch debt, mine an En lish."

"You should have come up with the rest of us

"And have got ten shillings in the pound f my two thousand. No, I went a different way work!"

Two thousand pounds! That sum agai mentioned in the very carriage of which I sat occupant. It was a singular coincidence, a I let my old thoughts drift away from me.

"I wish I had understood the way—for n debt's ten thousand."

"He could not have managed ten," was the reply; "it was a hard fight to get this, and I went to work in a way entirely my own. Johnson was paid too, by his brother, I believe."

"Who's his brother?"

"Oh! a land-bailiff—a fellow who has feathered his nest pretty well, or he would not flash about so much with *his* thousands. Those sorts of fellows are always sharp, and have an eye to their own interests as well as their master's."

"Well, it's a shame," said the stout man, "it's not treating us all alike. By George! this will make me extra hard to-morrow; and if I see a sign of shuffling, I'll sell him up."

"My dear fellow, there's no shuffling; I would not mind laying an even wager that you'll find everything square and open as the day—it's only a panic, or a pressure that has driven him into a corner for awhile. Give that man time, sir, to turn round, and he will pay every penny that he owes in two years. The man's a genius—the man's the soul of honour!"

"Oh! it's very fine for you to talk," said the stout man, giving himself an extra twist into his

railway rug, "I could talk like this—better than this—if I were in your shoes. I hate a genius—and as for honour, there isn't such a thing to be found, sir—damme!"

If I had tried to escape this dialogue, I could not. It was forced upon me, and I accepted it; it spoke of a great trouble to one whom I had loved—it seemed to throw a faint light upon actions which had been ever in the mist. An impulse that I could not restrain caused me to surprise the speakers by leaning suddenly towards them.

"Are you speaking of Mr. Stewart of Edinburgh?" I asked.

The stout man started, the thin man shrank back and looked askance at me. There was a pause, then the former said:

"No, ma'am—certainly not."

"I beg your pardon."

I relapsed into my old position, and the stout man, after one long stare at me, sat facing his companion, dumb and stolid. Once his lips twitched as though in response to a gesture from the gentleman opposite, but I saw no more to arouse my interest,

and presently both men went off to sleep again.

At Newcastle-on-Tyne the train stopped again, and the thin man nodded his head to the stout one, and said, "Good night—sorry that I am not going with you all the way!" a remark which the other took as an affront, and responded with an emphatic grunt.

Then I thought no more of the dialogue, but went back to my own reverie on things past and to come. Night stole on with time, and stage after stage of my journey was arrived at, passed. It was six in the morning, and the daylight was upon us when we reached Edinburgh, and I and my portmanteau were in a cab making for Princes Street. I looked out of my cab window at the city, scarcely stirring yet, and thought what a grand city it was, in that clear morning light, hemmed in by the great hills, and protected by the fortalice towering from its midst.

"You will like Edinburgh!" I thought of those words with which Mr. Stewart had puzzled me in the far-away times when my heart was younger. In his vain conceit he had pictured me

his wife, sitting by his side in the future Edinburgh days—he thought that he made up his mind then, and he was right in thinking that *I* should not reject him! All that appertained to love between us had been swept away by the great tide, yet there I was in Edinburgh, to make true a portion of his prophecy! I tried to rest in the hotel Mrs. Kingsworth had recommended me, and failed utterly. For the present sleep was denied me—there was no rest for me; I had not the peace of mind which bringeth rest. For two days and nights I had attempted to snatch at repose fitfully, and had failed—I was not tired; I was anxious to be stirring in search of Mrs. Kingsworth's son. I had an early breakfast, and then, after leaving orders whither any telegraphic message might be forwarded, I went across the street and railway bridge, and up the steps into High Street, Edinburgh.

I was conscious of being too early for business; the clocks had not struck nine yet, and though I found more bustle in the older part of the town, yet it was the stir and confusion of a poor neighbourhood. I had no difficulty in discovering Mr.

Stewart's place of business—a gaunt, old-fashioned house of many stories, having on its basement floor two swing glass-doors, through which I passed into a large counting-house, where two or three clerks were flitting to and fro.

Was Mr. Stewart within?

No; he was not expected till ten, and then he would be engaged till twelve or one—would I leave my name?

No, I would not leave my name. What was Mr. Stewart's private address?

Mr. Stewart's private address was Charlotte Square, in the new town; but Mr. Stewart was probably not in Edinburgh at present, and if he were, it was doubtful whether he could be seen.

I did not ask for surmises—I thanked the clerk and retraced my steps across Waverley Bridge, and went along George Street, to Charlotte Square. I had no difficulty in finding Mr. Stewart's house—a mansion of imposing exterior, the shutters of which were still barring out the day-light.

I knocked, and a footman responded to the summons.

"I wish to see Mr. Stewart, if you please," I said.

"Beg pardon, miss; but Mr. Stewart only arrived from London by the six o'clock train, and went to his room at once. He left orders that he was not to be disturbed till ten."

"At ten I will call at his business-house."

I left my card with the servant, and retired. I went away to wonder at my propinquity to Mr. Stewart all the last night's journey—of the chances that I had had of saving time, and lost through ignorance.

Till ten wandering about Edinburgh, and loving it more upon further acquaintance—at ten o'clock at Mr. Stewart's house in High Street. Entering through the swing glass-doors again, I found the business interior changed: clerks moving about with alacrity from their desks to inner rooms; strange gentlemen standing in groups about the place, arguing and talking with some warmth; a man of forty, with a pen behind his ear, endeavouring to assemble the scattered atoms, and talking every moment of "the room on the first floor, gentlemen—the room on the first floor;" the stout gentleman who had travelled to Edinburgh with me passing from group to group, and gesticulating

violently. I stopped at the sight of this confusion, and the stout gentleman, whose sharp eyes nothing seemed to escape, caught sight of me at once.

"What, you a creditor, miss, also!" he said in a rough voice, that turned all faces in my direction; "by George! I did not bargain for that!"

"The room on the first floor, if you please, gentleman. If you please, the room on the first floor!"

"Has Mr. Stewart arrived?"

"Not yet."

"It's past ten—two minutes past ten," grumbled one.

"Not by Edinburgh time, gentlemen," said the chief clerk; "it wants exactly one minute and a half—oh! here's Mr. Stewart."

The swing glass-doors parted, and in he came, tall, erect and handsome as ever, with that look which ever commanded respect towards him, and cowed, as it were, resistance.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said half raising his hat from his head, and then turning at once to me.

"You have chosen a strange time, Miss Casey," he said; "and I have not an instant to spare. I

have promised to meet these people at ten, and cannot even stay to ask if all be well. Mr. Gilva show this lady to my room—or will you con again?"

"I will stay."

He passed from me, with a "This way, gentl men—the rest of our friends are upstairs, I pr sume;" and then merchant and creditors flow through a side passage, to which the head cle had been pointing ever since my entrance. Th head clerk was Mr. Gilvay, who led me into a roo on the right of the passage—a handsomely-fu nished office in itself, with three windows lookir upon the High Street. When he had turned ar left me, I sat down to think of the trouble th had swooped upon this merchant also, disarrangir all his life-long schemes, and affecting more liv than his own. Here seemed a clue to the pa demeanour of Richard Stewart too; and here f the first time came a far-off, dreamy suspicio which I could not put in shape yet.

Little as I knew of commercial matters, I coul from the past conversation in the railway carriag and from the present aspect of affairs, judge that th

was a meeting of creditors to hear the reasons for Mr. Stewart's summons, to judge the merchant upon his own version of affairs, to give him time to retrieve his losses, or to hurl him from his high estate, according to the verdict. He stood on the brink of ruin; he had been standing there defiant to the last, fighting his battle to the last, but the enemy had been too strong for him, and it was death or surrender now. He had deceived me and all past friends by his demeanour, but figures had been against him. They who lived by figures had seen the wreck battling with wind and tide, and were making for it before all chance was lost—not to save him but their property at stake in the goodly vessel he had once commanded. Let him sink with other unprosperous traders like him—and afford another moral to the world of commerce!

I waited for him patiently. His business was more urgent than mine, so far as himself was concerned at least, and I could not intrude upon it, or feel impatient at the time I waited there. Eleven and twelve struck, and still I could hear the shuffling of feet and the hum of voices in the room above my head.

It was striking one when the door opened, and Mr. Gilvay entered, followed by a page bearing some wine and biscuits on a tray.

"Mr. Stewart has desired me to see that you are not starved," he said quite facetiously; "he has sent me down from above stairs to request that you will accept of some slight refreshment after your long journey."

Could he think of me at such a time?

"He hopes to be with you in another hour. The meeting is going off admirably—how beautifully he has explained everything, to be sure! God bless him!" said he dashing at a snuff-box and taking refuge in a Brobdignagian pinch that went all over his shirt and waistcoat, "I knew he had only but to talk and convince the most pig-headed of the lot of them. I knew—I beg your pardon."

He seemed ashamed at his outburst, and shut his snuff-box hastily.

"I am sorry to see——" I began.

"My dear young lady—*we* are not sorry. We made no concealment of this, when we saw things must come to the wall. We had done our best as honest traders, and when the danger came, we

called our creditors together, manfully and openly, instead of in a corner as some people would have done, and we told them exactly how positions stood. Our books are as open as the day, and as full of honest facts as him I serve."

"It has been a hard trial for him."

"It has been harder, young lady, but he surmounted it. All last winter how he worked to stem the torrent!—if he went out into society to show he feared nothing, or to seem like himself in everything, he came back here at all hours of the night, to work and slave in secret. There's not so clever a man in all the world, or one who will do better yet. Such a man as Mr. Stewart can't sink, Miss. It's impossible—it's—bless me! how forgetful I am! He may want me at his elbow yet."

The clerk bustled away, and I was left alone once more. Left alone for a short while only, for there was a renewed bustle in the room above, and then a hasty pattering of feet down stairs and along the passage without the door; voices talking and laughing, everything betokening a pleasant end to a meeting which had given signs of storm. The

voices died away, and then the door opened and Mr. Stewart appeared.

His face was flushed somewhat, but there was no sternness in his looks.

"Good morning, Miss Casey," he said; "did I say good morning before?—in the hurry of business I nearly forgot."

"May I ask the result of this meeting, Mr. Stewart?"

"This meeting of the wolf-hounds to hunt down a man who has acknowledged himself not quite so rich and clever as people believed him?" he said with a laugh; "yes, it is settled. Not guilty."

"Not guilty," I repeated vaguely.

"Not guilty of embezzling my creditors' money to my own advantage—letting my bankers in for a heap of bills, carrying on my trade in a rash and foolish manner, driving by a hundred roads to ruin," said he; "I told the assembled community my position, my chances, and my power to pay every farthing that I owed if time were given me. I even told them of my fight to keep my name from this exposure—such as it is—but after all, when the day came which I could not ward off, I was rather

proud of it. What had I to fear from money grubbers like these, whose own sordid actions I would blush to imitate? But this is rather stagey," he added, the scornful look dying out of his face; "let me help you to some sherry. You have been too proud to assist yourself in my house!"

He passed me a glass of sherry, and filled one himself. It was not meant for mockery; it implied his welcome, his desire to be friends with me, it was attributable in some degree to the favourable sequence to the creditors meeting, that bowing to me over his wine-glass when I was raising mine to my lips. A strange time and place to be taking wine with Mark Stewart, but not without its grace on his part.

"Some day, when you and I are old folk—respectable old people, with grey hair and red eyes—I will tell you a story about my past battles; you may guess now why I came to Woundell Ball, or why, before that time, I was a man not easy to make out; you may guess wide of the truth, and do me still an injustice, but if I am not forestalled I will relate you that story, from the preface to the

Latin word at the end of the third volume. Now—egotism set aside—what has happened at the Hall?"

"A great deal since last night, Mr. Stewart," I answered, glad that he had changed a subject which had troubled me not a little; "more than I can explain, or have a right to explain. I am here to see my brother."

"Your brother John has left my service."

"Here to ask again if you will tell me the reason which separated you and him."

"There is no mystery in the matter now. I was on the verge of bankruptcy, and it was necessary to reduce my establishment by one-half. There was a vacancy in the firm of a Glasgow friend, and I thought that it would suit your brother. His chance of rising rapidly in the world was lost with mine."

"Then there was nothing against him, sir?"

"Nothing in the world—what should there be?" he answered. "Did I not tell you only two nights since that he had altered for the better?"

"Why not have told me all?"

"My lips were sealed till to-day," he said;

"until to-day I was not free to say a word. To-day the light streams in upon my past iniquity, and I am at your service. As it was, the Shylocks followed me to Wilthorpe, and would have no mercy, or hear no reason."

"Your brother Richard knew of this?"

"Yes—what made you guess that?"

"It matters not now; I cannot explain. I am bewildered and heart-sick. I have been distressed at home by Mrs. Kingsworth's illness—more than distressed by a wish to see and speak to my brother. Will you give me his late address?—you have that."

"Yes. My clerk shall copy it for you in one instant."

He touched the bell, and gave the requisite order. When we were alone again, he said, somewhat reluctantly:

"I am sorry to ask the question, but are there any fresh doubts in your mind concerning your brother?"

"I have said that I am bewildered, Mr. Stewart."

"You are a stranger here, and I may be of service to you. Business of very urgent need

must have brought you alone to Edinburgh."

"You are right, sir, but I—cannot—explain."

"I have no right to intrude upon your confidence," he answered. "Let me withdraw my question. If your brother be not at his old apartments—a very probable supposition—you will proceed to Glasgow. I will write out the address of my friend, to whom I recommended a good and faithful servant."

The clerk entered with two letters in his hand—one of which he laid upon the desk, saying,

"Here is Mr. Casey's address, sir—are *you* Miss Casey?" he asked, turning to me.

"Yes. That—that is a telegram, sent to my hotel!"

"And brought here at once at your request, Miss," he answered.

I snatched it from him, and tore open the letter.

"*Come back at once—Mrs. Kingsworth is worse!*"

"I must go back to Wilthorpe," I said, "Mrs. Kingsworth is dying—I left her dying. I knew it—I knew it!"

"Calm yourself, Miss Casey," Mr Stewart said, "this may be a needless alarm—an exaggerated report, that your return home will dissipate."

"I will go at once."

"There is no up train for an hour—let me walk with you quietly to your hotel, and thence to the railway station."

"If I could only see him—find him! How long will it take me to reach that place?" I said, pointing to the address.

"Five minutes."

"I will go at once."

The messenger entered again, looking a little worried with his oscillatory movements.

"If you please, sir, Mr. Casey has just entered the counting-house, and gone to his old desk."

"To his old desk!" said Mr. Stewart, amazed in his turn; "I have given no orders to that effect."

"I must see him——"

"Patience, Miss Casey. We have time before us. Mr. Brill, be kind enough to ask Mr. Casey to step this way?"

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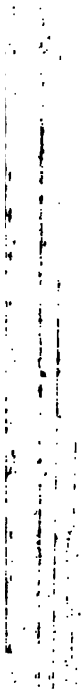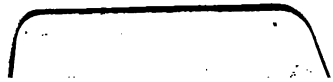
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